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The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Philosophy of Religion

Edited by Graham Oppy

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

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- religion and ethics
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Graham Oppy is Professor of Philosophy at Monash University, Australia. He is co-editor of the multivolume work *The History of Western Philosophy of Religion*, and author of *Ontological Arguments and Belief in God*, *Arguing about Gods*, *Philosophical Perspectives on Infinity*, *The Best Argument against God*, *Reinventing Philosophy of Religion*, *Describing Gods: An Investigation of Divine Attributes*, and co-author of *Reading Philosophy of Religion*.

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Graham Oppy

First published 2015
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge
711 Third Ave., New York, NY. 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

The Routledge handbook of contemporary philosophy of religion / edited by Graham Oppy.
pages cm. -- (Routledge handbooks in philosophy)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-84465-831-2 (hardback) -- ISBN 978-1-315-71941-2 (e-book) 1. Religion--
Philosophy. I. Oppy, Graham Robert, editor.

BL51.R5987 2015

210--dc23

2014037370

ISBN: 978-1-844-65831-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-315-71941-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Bembo
by Taylor & Francis Books

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INTRODUCTION

The invitation to contribute to this handbook began as follows:

This *Handbook* is conceived as a work that overviews new and emerging theories and trends in philosophy of religion, and that seeks to open new avenues of discussion and to push debate forwards in a philosophically rigorous way. The aim is to have chapters contributed by philosophers who are widely regarded as leaders and experts in the fields upon which they are invited to write, and to ask authors both to provide in-depth discussion of the current state of play and to make an original and cutting-edge contribution that significantly enhances debate.

It was no part of the conception of the *Handbook* to be comprehensive: this handbook is not a systematic introduction to every cutting-edge development in philosophy of religion. Nonetheless, it was part of the conception of the *Handbook* to also convey something of the breadth and depth of current work in philosophy of religion.

The *structure* of the work reflects some of the editor's views about the ways in which the field of philosophy of religion is ideally conceived. However, those who provided the *content* of the work do not all share the views of the editor concerning ways in which the field of philosophy of religion is ideally conceived. I shall first say something about the structure of the work, and my own views concerning the ways in which philosophy of religion is ideally conceived; and then I shall say something about why these views are so evidently controversial.

First, there are many different and legitimate ways in which philosophy of religion can be theoretically conceived. While only a small sample of approaches is represented here, the sample at least gestures towards the range of ways in which philosophy of religion can be understood. Alongside the feminist, phenomenological, postmodern, new atheist, Wittgensteinian, and fundamentalist approaches canvassed, there might also have been chapters on – among others – analytic, process, Vedānta, Marxist, structuralist, Thomist, Freudian, existentialist, Calvinist, theosophist, and Hegelian takes on philosophy of religion. Moreover, for many of these labels, there might have been several chapters: there is, after all, considerable disagreement among, for example, analytic philosophers about how best to conceive of philosophy of religion.

Second, there are many different and legitimate ways of understanding central concepts in philosophy of religion from contrasting religious standpoints. We take the example of the

concept of divinity, considering what ‘the divine’ looks like from the standpoint of Chinese, Islamic, Hindu, and Christian thought. Of course, even in this one example, we can’t consider all of the ways in which ‘the divine’ has been conceived from these kinds of standpoints – and there are other religious standpoints to which we are unable to give any consideration: Jewish, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Shinto, and so on. Moreover, there are many other concepts that deserve the same kind of careful consideration from the standpoint of the diverse religions of the world: *salvation, devotion, nature, fate, virtue, desert*, and so forth.

Third, there are many epistemological questions that are raised by the religions of the world. The diversity of the religions of the world – and the many disagreements between them – raises interesting questions about the significance of disagreement, the analysis of superstition, the ways in which religious experience and religious faith support diverse religious beliefs, and the ways in which science is related to religion. Of course, there are many other epistemological questions that are raised by the religions of the world – e.g., questions about the *rationality* of religious belief, the *justification* of religious belief, the extent to which it is proper to speak of *knowledge* in connection with religious conviction, the extent to which religious belief requires *evidential* support, the extent to which rejection of religious belief relies upon more wide-ranging philosophical *scepticism*, and so forth – and that receive distinctively different answers in different religious and philosophical traditions.

Fourth, there are many metaphysical questions, and questions for philosophy of language, that are raised by the religions of the world. The sacred texts of the religions of the world raise many interesting questions. On the one hand, there are questions of interpretation: What should be taken literally, and what should be regarded as analogy or metaphor in those texts and, more broadly, in the doctrines that characterise those religions? On the other hand, there are questions of origins: What can we determine about the composition and compilation of the sacred texts of the religions of the world? Perhaps not entirely unrelatedly, the religions of the world also provoke fundamental metaphysical questions. Should we suppose that the fundamental claims of the religions of the world are factual – or should we suppose that these claims are properly to be given some kind of anti-realist construal? Should we suppose that we can subject the claims of the religions of the world to metaphysical assessment – or is there something antithetical to genuine religion in the impulse to carry out any such assessment? Naturally, there are many other metaphysical questions that are raised by the religions of the world, but that are not canvassed in the pages of this *Handbook*: e.g., questions about souls, reincarnation and immortality; questions about freedom and responsibility; and questions about material constitution and transcendence.

Fifth, there are many questions of political philosophy that are raised by the religions of the world. We take up a set of connected questions about religious violence, religious tolerance, religious pluralism, and the proper role of religion in public life. But, of course, consideration of these issues leaves untouched many significant questions that religion poses for political philosophy. Do people have rights in connection with religion? If so, how are those rights related to other (putative) rights, e.g., freedom of speech, freedom of association, and so forth? How are one person’s religious rights related to the *fundamental* secular rights of others? Do people have a right to religious *belief*? Do parents and guardians have a right to try to pass on their beliefs – and, in particular, their religious beliefs – to their own children and to other children in their care?

Sixth, there are many ethical questions that are raised by the religions of the world. There are normative questions, and meta-ethical questions. There are questions about meaning, and questions about suffering, and questions about flourishing. Is there an essential connection between religion and human flourishing? If so, is it religion or freedom from religion that is essential to human flourishing? Is religion a means – perhaps the sole, or sole significant,

means – to genuine alleviation of human suffering, or is religion an instrument – perhaps one of the principal instruments – of human suffering? Or is religion both a (significant) instrument of human suffering and a (principal) means for the alleviation of human suffering? Is religion a significant cause of violence? Are religions essentially markers and perpetuators of difference? Can those who have no religion lead (ultimately) meaningful lives? Can those who have religion lead (ultimately) meaningful lives?

Seventh, there are many questions belonging to philosophy of science (broadly conceived). What do recent developments in cognitive science – in particular, in cognitive anthropology – tell us about religion and religious belief? Is there an essential conflict between religion and science? Is there an essential conflict between religion and metaphysical naturalism? Are pantheism and panentheism in conflict with science? Are pantheism and panentheism in conflict with metaphysical naturalism? Is religious belief at odds with scientific reasoning?

While we canvas intersections between philosophy of religion and, respectively, epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of science, there are intersections between philosophy of religion and many other sub-disciplines of philosophy. There is, for example, much of interest to be said about intersections between philosophy of religion and logic, theory of argument, rhetoric, decision theory, philosophy of probability, philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of physics, philosophy of biology, philosophy of mind, philosophy of law, philosophy of education, aesthetics and philosophy of art. So the *Handbook* is comprehensive neither in its coverage of the various subdomains of philosophy that intersect with philosophy of religion, nor in its coverage of the intersections with philosophy of religion of those particular subdomains of philosophy that do receive some coverage: epistemology, philosophy of language, metaphysics, political philosophy, ethics, and philosophy of science.

As the discussion to this point makes clear, I take the primary subject matter of philosophy of religion to be philosophy of *religion*. In my view, philosophy of religion pursues philosophical questions that are prompted by the collective religions of the world. While I do not mean to deny that there are philosophical questions that arise in connection with particular religions, I want to say that the philosophies of those particular religions are specialised sub-disciplines of a broader discipline. Moreover, I want to say that there are significant parts of philosophy of religion – including, in particular, those parts of philosophy of religion that compare and assess the worldviews that belong to the various religions of the world – that also require serious consideration and examination of non-religious and anti-religious attitudes, behaviours, activities, and organisations. Apart from questions about the relationship between philosophy of religion and philosophies of particular religions, there are also questions about the relationship between philosophy of religions and religious philosophies. At least as a first approximation, we can think of religious philosophies as attempts to cast the whole of philosophy from a particular religious standpoint; and we can think of non-religious philosophies – e.g. naturalistic philosophies – as attempts to cast the whole of philosophy from a non-religious standpoint. While philosophy of religion may sometimes be required to attend to religious philosophies, it seems to me that we should not think of religious philosophies as sub-disciplines of philosophy of religion.

Of course, the views expressed in the last couple of paragraphs are controversial. There is much in the behaviour of contemporary philosophers of religion which suggests that a great many of them think of philosophy of religion as religious philosophy from the standpoint of the one true religion or worldview (whatever they take the one true religion or worldview to be). By the lights of many contemporary philosophers of religion, philosophy of religion just is Christian Philosophy, or Islamic Philosophy, or Jewish Philosophy, or Buddhist Philosophy, or

Hindu Philosophy, or Confucian Philosophy, or Daoist Philosophy, or Shinto Philosophy, or Jain Philosophy, or Sikh Philosophy, or Naturalist Philosophy, or Atheist Philosophy, or Secular Philosophy, or Humanist Philosophy, or whatever. However, while it seems to me that to take this kind of view is simply to confuse subject matter with theoretical orientation, I certainly did not make it a requirement for contributing to this handbook that one agree with me on this point.

I have many debts to acknowledge. Tristan Palmer proposed that I edit a work of this kind some years before Acumen Publishing was taken over by Taylor & Francis, and he helped me to get a contract with Acumen to produce this work. Nick Trakakis discussed the content of the work with me prior to the issuing of the first round of invitations to contributors, not too long after we finally polished off our *History of Western Philosophy of Religion*. People who were themselves unable to accept invitations to contribute offered suggestions about who else might be invited to contribute. Monash University generously allowed me a sabbatical year in 2013, during which I managed to knock the manuscript into shape. Karen Gillen provided invaluable assistance by preparing the index. And all of the contributors not only provided excellent chapters, but also displayed great patience during the time that it took to get the manuscript to the press. To everyone involved, my heartfelt thanks.

Part I

Theoretical orientations

1

FEMINIST APPROACHES TO RELIGION¹

Beverley Clack

Introduction

Over the last fifty years, the application of feminist ideas and methodologies to the practices of theology has had considerable impact.² Feminist theologians have challenged the way in which the discipline of theology understands itself, arguing that it is impossible to consider spirituality and belief in God (or gods) without understanding the way in which sexuality and gender affects the construction of these concepts. Indeed, feminist theologians have been extremely successful in attaining their goals: it is now difficult to imagine a university course in theology that does not in some way address issues of sexuality and identity.

By comparison, Anglo-American philosophy of religion has been somewhat tardy in taking seriously the effect that the exploration of issues of identity might have upon the construction and analysis of religious belief. A range of reasons might account for this reticence. There are, for example, relatively few philosophers of religion who are women. More far-reaching is the effect felt from the dominance of analytic philosophy of religion in the Anglo-American forms of the subject. Analytic philosophers of religion are committed to an approach that stresses the *rational* engagement with religion. This is most clearly seen in the way in which belief in God is explored. God is defined in terms that are believed to transcend their basis in the specificities of any particular faith tradition. Terms deemed common and acceptable to all the great monotheistic faiths are used to define what 'the divine' might be. The philosopher's task is *then* to determine whether there are good grounds for holding to belief in such a God. Analysing belief and determining whether it is rational or not becomes the prime focus of concern: and, importantly, this need not imply engagement with the lived experience of religious believers. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule. For example, Philip Quinn and Charles Taliaferro (1997) are at pains to allow space for philosophies of religion defined through the lens of different religious traditions, and D.Z. Phillips consistently exhorted philosophers of religion to place the believer at the heart of their considerations, e.g., in *Reason without Explanation* (1978). While noting the importance of such strategies, the main thrust of the subject has been towards engaging with a more general understanding of what God and religion mean.

Pursuing philosophy of religion in this way elevates ideas of abstraction and general applicability. For feminists, approaching religion thus is problematic: not least because they wish to draw attention to the way in which the ideas humans develop about their world invariably

reflect their own individual experience and social placing. We are embodied beings, and the facts of embodiment affect our ideas about the world we inhabit.

This chapter explores the feminist critique of analytic philosophy of religion, as well as noting some of the ways in which feminists envisage future philosophies of religion. The plural 'philosophies' is significant here. There is no one generally agreed alternative feminist approach. Rather, a range of approaches are emerging that suggest something of the diversity possible when one allows the significance of gender and identity to shape accounts of religion and the divine.

The feminist critique of (philosophy of) religion

Feminist theology and the philosophical critique of religion

The feminist critique of religion has much in common with that of the nineteenth-century philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. Feuerbach (1841/1957) argues that the concept of God is a human construction which reifies the values of any particular human society. For the feminist, to accept this claim is not sufficient in itself. If 'God' stands for those qualities that human beings and specific human societies deem valuable, precisely *whose* values does the philosophical concept of God reflect?

In addressing this question, feminists first turned their attention to the key attributes which define the God of philosophical theism. The theist's God is defined in terms of power, knowledge and detachment. 'He' is all-powerful, all-knowing, and radically self-sufficient. Furthermore, this God is impassible (cannot suffer), an attribute with connotations of invulnerability. God is immutable (cannot change). If these factors are taken together, it seems that we have a telling picture of God made in 'man's' image. Replace the word 'God' with the word 'man' and one is left with the stereotypical picture of what constitutes masculinity in a society whose cultural and social life has been – and continues to be – defined and dominated by men.

By tracing the development of the distinctively feminist philosophies of religion that have appeared in recent years, one gets a sense of the way in which the early feminist critique of religion has been built upon. The earliest feminist analyses of the concept of God were concerned with exposing the way in which the notion of God has been used to legitimate male domination. The post-Christian theologian Mary Daly, a key figure in the quest for a female-centred approach to spirituality, began by outlining the extent to which the concept of God is derived from male experience of the world. Writing of Christianity – although, arguably, her words could be applied to any of the major monotheistic faiths – she notes that 'the myths and symbols of Christianity are essentially sexist' (Daly 1975: 227). The language habitually used of God is distinctively male, both in terms of the attributes ascribed to God, but also in terms of the gender-language used of God. God is resolutely and definitively 'He'. According to Daly, such language does not reflect a mere quirk of fate. It reflects an ideology that has a very real effect on the way in which human relationships are shaped. In a famous passage she notes that 'since "God is male, the male is God. God the Father legitimates all earthly Godfathers' (Daly 1975: 227). The language of religion cannot be detached from the effect it has on human relationships. Divine male power supports human male power. Philosophers stand accused of distortion if they insist on viewing such language in abstract ways divorced from their context in human life and experience.

Feminist scholars of religion built upon Daly's work, seeking to expose the concept of God as a male construct of divinity. Pursued in this way, the concept of God is revealed as supporting and justifying masculinist concepts and values. Sharon Welch provides a fine example of this method. At one point in her analysis of the atmosphere of 'cultured despair' prevalent in

the last throes of the Cold War in the late 1980s, she turns her attention to the concept of divine omnipotence. Rather than consider this concept in isolation from human practices, she asks what the *desire* for an omnipotent God signifies. Her answer is not a cheery one. For Welch, it reflects and justifies forms of destructive human behaviour. The desire to be 'all-powerful', reflected in the concept of God, speaks to a desire that should not be cultivated: 'the political logic of such doctrines [is] the glorification of domination' (Welch 1989: 111). An all-powerful deity lends itself to the drive for power. Moreover, idealising omnipotence contains the belief that absolute power is an absolute good: after all, God, as perfect, is defined as *all*-powerful. It would seem that in glorifying divine omnipotence, human beings – or rather human *rulers* – are similarly encouraged to seek after such power. Welch refutes the very idea that absolute power is good. We only have to consider human history to see the legacy of thinking of power in this way. As she puts it, 'absolute power is a destructive trait' (Welch 1989: 111). If this is so, ideas – be they philosophical or theological – can never be considered 'innocent'. If God embodies absolute power (is omnipotent), consideration needs to be paid to the effect that this glorification of power has on human relationships. A crucial part of the feminist scholar's work is, then, to connect ideas with practice.

It is worth considering how Welch proceeds in her analysis. Absolute power only makes sense when located against the backdrop of a hierarchical society. If rulers are to aspire to the power of God, the ruled are to submit to their 'masters' just as the Church is to submit to 'her' God:

The result of the theological valorisation of absolute power is the erotics of domination, the glorification of submission to the greatest power.

(Welch 1989: 117)

Such a belief has considerable ramifications for women, traditionally viewed as subordinate to men. If the hierarchical structure on which such ideas depend is also divinely ordained, there is no way in which women can challenge the impact that this structure has upon their lives.

The liberation theologian Dorothee Soelle provides a fitting example of what such beliefs might mean in practice. Concerned to illuminate the way in which ideas about God affect lived experience, Soelle describes the experience of a woman suffering domestic violence. She goes into this case in considerable detail, giving a sense of the woman's isolation, of her dependence upon the whims of a brutal husband. She also considers the psychological bars forged by her religious beliefs that act against her resisting her fate. Living in a religious community, she finds it difficult to challenge her suffering because of a theology which sees suffering as something sent by God. As such, it must be accepted. Soelle claims that this woman's experience reflects the logic which emanates from belief in an all-powerful God: God is visualised as a sadist who demands the sufferer to be a masochist with no choice but to conform to their lot and bear it (Soelle 1975: 10–16).

Like Soelle, Welch wants to challenge such thinking, making a similar connection between forms of theological language and human praxis. If such challenges are taken seriously, then the very way in which God is conceptualised must be reviewed. Moreover, as Soelle and Welch argue, the concept of God is not philosophically neutral; it can be mapped onto the social values that constructed it in the first place. As Soelle's example shows, models of God have an impact on the extent to which justice is or is not possible for women.

Towards a feminist philosophy of religion: Jantzen and Anderson

While Welch's critique of omnipotence engages with the key philosophical theme of power and considers it theologically, her central concern is not to create a feminist philosophy of religion.

Other feminist scholars have furthered this project. The work of Grace Jantzen (1998) and Pamela Sue Anderson (1998; 2012) suggests something of what a feminist philosophy of religion might look like. At the heart of both accounts is a critique of the method and concerns of the discipline itself.

Jantzen's approach challenges the basic methodology that informs the analytic philosopher's engagement with religion. At its heart, she argues, lies the assumption that the philosopher is a rational subject who weighs the evidence and comes to a (largely) detached response to the problems posed. That such a stance is unproblematic is rarely challenged. Issues of embodiment – what it might mean to be approaching this topic as a gendered and raced subject at a particular point in human history – are considered unnecessary and beside the point (Jantzen 1996).

We might, by way of illustration, consider Tim Mawson's introduction to philosophy of religion (2005). For Mawson, 'calling God a "he" and calling God a "she" is a matter of indifference philosophically speaking'. That is not to say that this kind of language might be of no interest to broader sociological investigations, but Mawson is at pains to dismiss such reflections as irrelevant for the philosopher: 'power connotations [are] *accidentally* associated with the genders' (ibid. 19, my emphasis). If we are to be 'clear-headed' as philosophers of religion we should not be distracted by such cultural variables. 'We' recognise that God is not gendered, and so the language we use is insignificant. (One wonders, at this point, precisely who constitutes 'we' for Mawson.) Resolutely refusing to engage with the implications such language might have for the construction of human relationships, he comes to this conclusion: 'given that nothing can turn on the decision one way or the other, I'm going to continue within the tradition in which I have grown up, calling God a he' (ibid. 20).

Jantzen, like Welch before her, resists such conclusions. Drawing upon Feuerbach's contention that the way God is conceptualised reveals the values of the society that created that concept, she argues that the concept of God reflects the ideals and concerns of those who defined it. Given that men have been the main figures in the construction of the discipline and its debates, it is hardly surprising if the way in which religion is subsequently understood depends, similarly, upon masculine preoccupations.

The example to which Jantzen draws attention is the over-emphasis on death. Why, she asks, is the engagement with death of fundamental concern to philosophers of religion? Why is the topic of immortality a central one for the philosophical study of religion? 'Can I survive my death?' 'What happens to me after death?' Philosophers of religion have invariably related the concerns of religion to such questions. Jantzen's response is stark: such questions reflect a discipline that is 'necrophilic'; a discipline that reflects a masculinist obsession with death (1998: 137–41).

Whether she is correct or altogether fair in making this connection is a moot point. Are women *really* not interested in death? After all, Jantzen has harsh words to say about the French feminist Julia Kristeva, who offers powerful reflections on death as well as the related themes of loss, melancholia, and depression (Jantzen 1998: 196; Kristeva 1989). Jantzen seems to polarise the concerns of men and women while failing to pay adequate attention to the possibility noted at the beginning of the twentieth century by William James (1902/1985) that different individuals will respond differently to the concerns of the world they inhabit.

In place of the obsession with death that she perceives in the tradition, Jantzen suggests a different model for religious reflection focused on birth. Theorising birth allows women's experiences and lives to shape Jantzen's philosophy of religion. And there is good evidence for her contention that birth has been neglected as a philosophical category. The existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927/1962: 295) may write of the individual being 'thrown into the world', but to consider the process of birth seriously undermines this assertion. We are *not*,

in fact, 'thrown into the world'; we enter it through the body of a woman. To reflect upon this fact is to challenge Heidegger's focus on the lonely individual who creates 'his' life as 'he' sees fit. The process of birthing reveals a different truth: we are immediately placed into a network of relationships (even if those relationships are sometimes far from adequate). Jantzen challenges the absence of a proper philosophical discussion of birth (and by extension relationship), and stresses, with Christine Battersby, 'the ontological significance of the fact that selves are born' (Battersby 1998: 3). To start here leads to a different set of concerns for philosophers of religion; and for Jantzen these revolve around questions of how to live, how to flourish, and how to acquire justice for all those who have been born (Jantzen 1998: 227–53).

There is much to commend Jantzen's approach: not least because it makes philosophy of religion an ethical pursuit, with the question of the practice of living as significant as the reflection on beliefs (see also Hollywood 2004). Yet to engage with birth as a philosophical category is not without its difficulties for the feminist. One risks falling into the essentialist trap where 'Woman' is defined according to her specific reproductive function. This move has enabled generations of patriarchal thinkers to limit the scope of women's lives.³ Invariably, such accounts of what it means to be a woman lead to the conclusion that because women give birth they are the ones best placed to look after children. Thus 'the home' and the private realm are the best place for women. The nineteenth-century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, for example, notes how to 'watch a girl playing with a child, dancing and singing with it the whole day' leads one to ask 'what, with the best will in the world, a man could do in her place' (Schopenhauer 1970: 81).

Connecting women with reproduction and child-rearing suggests a further connection with nature. While this might seem agreeable when thinking ecologically (see Griffin 1982), it is more problematic when placed alongside the history of western philosophy. For philosophers from Aristotle to Hegel, the perceived connection with nature means that women are less likely to be capable of rational thought than the male who has been viewed as more distant from the influence of natural processes.⁴

Jantzen's strategy for avoiding such conclusions is to emphasise less the actual experience of giving birth, and more the ramifications of thinking of humans as beings *who are born*. Rather than think of ourselves as 'mortals' (beings destined to die), something significant happens when we think of ourselves as 'natals' (beings who have been born). Less attention can as a result be given to thinking about the inevitable end of life in the grave, more on the relationships that support us in the present moment. As the writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860–1935) (1923/1976: 46–47) evocatively puts it:

To the death based religion, the main question is, 'What is going to happen to me after I am dead?' a posthumous egotism. To the birth based religion, the main question is, 'What must be done for the child who is born?' an immediate altruism. The death-based religions have led to a limitless individualism, a demand for the eternal extension of personality ... The birth-based religion is necessarily and essentially altruistic, a forgetting of oneself for the good of the child.

For Jantzen, theorising natality affects the way in which philosophy of religion is practised. New themes come to light. The philosophy of religion becomes political in the broadest sense, reflecting and shaping the way in which community and society are understood. Rejecting the notion that we are self-contained, autonomous individuals, she advocates the importance of dependency. Emerging from reflection on the mother/child relationship, this theme forms the basis for deeper discussion of the significance of relationship itself. Eschewing the obsession with

the individual – a concern that she locates at the heart of discussions of death – leads to renewed focus on this world. Under natality, *this* life and all that implies would be taken seriously. And for Jantzen's own project this necessitates placing love and human flourishing at the heart of her theorising.

There is much in Jantzen's project to excite the feminist philosopher of religion. At times, the topics deemed important by philosophers of religion can seem rather rarefied and of interest only to those working within the field. Yet aspects of Jantzen's analysis need further interrogation. We have already considered the kind of challenge that might be made to the gendering of the concern with death; and we might further note that particular religious groups present a problem for Jantzen's claim that death holds more interest for the male than the female. For example, the Spiritualist Church is a movement predominantly formed and led by female mediums. At the very least, this suggests that Jantzen is mistaken in her contention that women *per se* are not concerned with the question of what happens after death.

More problematic, perhaps, is her desire to avoid the essentialist trap by distancing the paradigm of natality from the lived experience of birthing. There is a tendency for her writing to suggest a clear distinction between life (and birth) and death (Jantzen 1998: 140). Considering the realities of the *experience* of birthing suggests a more complex relationship between life and death, for women suffer miscarriage, stillbirth, and sometimes death during labour. Such painful experiences of loss suggest that birth is by no means only connected to life and flourishing. If anything, the unpredictability of the process reveals that 'in life we are in the midst of death'.

If we were only to focus on such criticisms, however, we would miss the distinctiveness of Jantzen's approach. Philosophy of religion in her hands moves from being a purely theoretical engagement with religious belief to a method for 'becoming divine'. In making this move, her philosophy is therapeutic: it is shaped by the desire to effect change in the self. This move is not so surprising when one realises Jantzen's indebtedness to the French feminist and psychoanalyst, Luce Irigaray. It is from Irigaray that Jantzen derives her title 'Becoming Divine'. What precisely this means is extremely difficult to pin down. Given her criticisms of the discussion of death, Jantzen cannot mean some kind of transcendent existence outside this embodied one. What she has in mind seems to be the pursuit of a full and fulfilling human life, one where the concern is to aid not just the flourishing of oneself but also that of others (see Jantzen 1998: 227–53). Feminist philosophy of religion in her hands becomes an implicitly political pursuit.

After reading Jantzen's radical redesign of the subject, Pamela Sue Anderson's work can seem rather traditional by comparison. Concerned with epistemology, Anderson cannot – indeed, will not – evade the practice of reason (1998). This is not to say that she offers a simplistic account of what 'reason' involves. Like Jantzen, she is critical of the idea that one can achieve an 'objective' stance on any subject. She rejects the notion that one can approach any subject as a detached observer, which is one of the central features of the methodology of analytic philosophy. Indeed, Anderson's concern is to modify the definition of reason, arguing for recognition of 'epistemic locatedness' (Anderson 2012). In her early work, she applies the ideas of Sandra Harding to this end. Harding argues for an account of reason informed by recognising the possibility of different points of view (Harding 1991). This 'standpoint epistemology' introduces the idea that reason is always something applied by individuals. The problem with the kind of epistemology that underpins mainstream philosophies of religion is that there is a tendency to assume that 'Reason' is a universal faculty untainted by the concerns of the individual philosopher. Harding and Anderson refute the simplicity of this definition. However, to accept that the experience of being a particular individual at a particular time in history colours one's concerns does not mean that 'the truth' is impossible to achieve. Rather, to arrive at 'the truth' involves a high degree of awareness of the issues that influence one's discussions, and a willingness to

engage with the concerns of others. And here gender becomes most significant. Our experience of the world, filtered through gender, race, and class, influences the things that we deem important. Problems arise when we uncritically accept the rightness of our position or when a profession – or discipline – is dominated by one group who espouse only one perspective on the world. If we are to attain any degree of awareness of what constitutes ‘the truth’, we will need to engage with a variety of perspectives in our philosophy as well as in our world.

At the heart of Anderson’s project is the alignment of love and reason. This might seem strange, for love and desire (defined as feeling or emotion) have invariably been juxtaposed to – or, at best, removed from – reason. Anderson resists this polarisation. In so doing, she forces engagement with the gendered construction of philosophy of religion. Historically, women have been associated with desire while men have been associated with reason. In identifying this distinction she builds upon the work of earlier feminist philosophers like Genevieve Lloyd (1984). This habitual identification goes some way to clarifying Jantzen’s resistance to defining natality through reflection on the actual experience of birthing. Women’s connection with natural processes has all too often been used to exclude them from the life of reason and thus from the work of philosophy itself. Kant, in his discussion of the differences between the sexes, notes that ‘a woman who has a head full of Greek [the language of the philosophers Plato and Aristotle] ... might as well even have a beard’ (1764/1960: 78). Women, associated with nature, beauty, and sexuality are thus to be excluded from the application of cool-headed reason.

Anderson’s intention, however, is not to reject (male) reason in favour of (female) desire. Rather, she exposes this gendered construction, and attempts to bring both aspects of human experience together, for without engaging with desire there can be no satisfying discussion of the impulses that lead to the construction of religion in the first place. At the same time, to exclude reason would mean that there can be no critical engagement with religion; no interrogation of whether the particular forms that it takes are healthy for human beings or not. This attempt to unite two apparently opposed features of human life influences the eclectic sources that she employs. Philosophers like Kant are employed alongside continental theorists whose ideas are influenced by psychoanalysis (most notably, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray). Her method enables the development of a feminist philosophy of religion grounded in ‘the lived experience’ of being human (Anderson 1998: 33), where philosophy is not just about the application of reason, but also involves engaging with the desires that permeate every aspect of human life.

Shaping the subject: feminism, identity and religion

So what might happen to the content of philosophy of religion if the kind of perspectives developed by Jantzen and Anderson were taken seriously? While there is no one feminist approach to the subject, it is interesting to note the way in which identity and subjectivity underpin these diverse approaches.

Thinking again about the concept of God

Every man (according to Feuerbach) and every woman who is not fated to remain a slave to the logic of the essence of man, must imagine a God, an objective-subjective place or path whereby the self could be coalesced in space and time: unity of instinct, heart, and knowledge, unity of nature and spirit, condition for the abode and for saintliness.

(Irigaray, cited in Jantzen 1994; 1998: 12)

Exploration of feminist philosophy of religion reveals that it involves more than refusal of the male pronoun for God or the substitution of that pronoun with that of the female. This does not, however, mean that there is little discussion of the way in which the concept of God has been constructed. Through critiquing the concept of God, different accounts of the divine emerge. For some, like Mary Daly, God is not 'a being' (or noun), but rather 'be-ing' (or a verb) (Daly 1973/1986: 33–34). In Anderson's work a similar trend away from God as a being can also be detected; albeit in a rather different way. For Anderson, the divine is understood along the lines of Kantian regulative ideals (Anderson 2012: 135, 199–200). A similar idea illuminates Jantzen's discussion of what it means to 'become divine'. Divinity becomes a form of behaviour, rather than the description of a supernatural being.

Others, like Sallie McFague (1983), suggest a different approach which focuses on the language used of the divine. McFague argues for a broadening out of such images to include female language and imagery, as well as images which have no basis in gender. According to McFague, embarking on this process reveals the hidden and often revolutionary content of the Bible. The biblical writers use a plethora of images to describe God, and McFague argues that this is because they do not want us to fall into the trap of thinking we know what, precisely, God is. Accepting the need for different images of the divine supports a concept of God in tune with the concerns of feminists. In McFague's theology (1983: 177–88), God is best understood as a friend, an image that suggests the importance of resisting paternal images which can trap us in the infantilism of childhood.

McFague is a Christian, her account of religious language informed by biblical categories. Other feminists have pursued a different path, arguing that what is needed is something more radical than a supplementing of the (male) images habitually used of God. What is needed is a 'return to the Goddess', and in making this analysis they embark on *theology* as opposed to *theology*.

At first glance, naming a deity in female terms suggests a simple reversal of the traditional God with its male language and dominance of male cultural forms. This need not be the case. For many theologians the attempt to establish the existence or otherwise of some divine being is not their primary concern. As Starhawk (1990: 11), a radical feminist writer from the United States, explains:

When I say Goddess I am not talking about a being somewhere outside of this world nor am I proposing a new belief system. I am talking about choosing an attitude: choosing to take this living world, the people and creatures in it, as the ultimate meaning and purpose of life, to see the world, the earth and our lives as sacred.

'Goddess' is a way of expressing the significance of human life and relationships. At the same time, theologians use the language of Goddess to reflect upon what it means to be a woman. They argue, in a similar way to Feuerbach, that it is through religious language that one's identity as a human being is formed. So Carol Christ sees the Goddess as a symbol that enables women to come to terms with their sexuality in a positive way. She writes of the Goddess as a 'symbol [which] aids the process of naming and reclaiming the female body and its cycles and processes' (Christ and Plaskow 1979: 281). Christ points out that, like the Christian God, the Goddess is often described in triune terms. She is Virgin, Mother, and Crone. Acceptance and appropriation of the different stages of a woman's life in this dramatic way enables women 'to value youth, creativity and wisdom in themselves and other women' (Christ and Plaskow 1979: 281). Thus the task of *theology* is intimately connected to issues of female self awareness and self acceptance.

Such notions fit rather well with the contention Irigaray makes when calling for a 'female divine' that acts as a divine horizon for women's self-becoming. Irigaray is renowned for advocating a feminism of sexual difference. What matters is not 'equality' with the male, for equality is invariably defined as women being given entrance to the male world where they are allowed to pursue male ways of being. Instead, she advocates the pursuit of genuine alterity for women: in other words, she wants women to be able to pursue the kind of lives which reflect their distinctive womanhood. The danger with such an approach, as the French feminist Michèle Le Doeuff astutely comments, is that it can lend itself to the kind of inequality that has dogged philosophy – and indeed women – for centuries (Le Doeuff 1998/2003: 65–66). Women come to be defined as less rational than men, associated more with the natural world, and they are then supposed to glory in this identity. Emphasising 'difference', for Le Doeuff, is just another strategy for marginalising women.

Alongside such criticisms runs an even more damaging one. Is all this talk of 'self-development' a way of ignoring social inequalities in favour of private religious experience?⁵ In other words, I can focus on developing my subjectivity with little sense of the prophetic function of religion to challenge injustice (for details of these criticisms, see Raphael 1999: 37–40).

This is a damning conclusion and not entirely fair. As Melissa Raphael (1996) points out, theology necessitates a radical reappraisal of the notion of divinity. If the divine is not understood as a cosmic force or agent outside of this world, but as a way of endowing this life with meaning, a fundamental change in human attitudes to each other but also to the environment is needed. 'Order' does not come from without; and that has implications not only for the God who is understood as the 'Prime Mover' and the 'First Cause', but also for the Western capitalist intent to impose 'order' on an apparently 'chaotic' world: 'An ecologically harmonious culture that listened to the rhythms of infinity would show patriarchal production to be the dissonant negative chaos that it is' (Raphael 1996: 285). It also places an imperative on the theologian: to work for a world that is valued, not plundered.

Thinking again about 'patriarchal' religion

If theologians seek an account of the divine that stands apart from the main monotheistic faiths, other feminists attempt to re-engage with the mainstream religious traditions. Far from seeing these traditions as irredeemably patriarchal, reformist feminists suggest that there is much in the world's religions that can be developed to critique the very values which emanate from a male-dominated and male-defined society. While the methods employed can look quite different, at the heart of such approaches is the attempt to take seriously the relationship between one's religious tradition and the way it shapes and supports the construction of identity.

Melissa Raphael's Jewish feminist theology of the Holocaust offers a useful example of the feminist method of deconstruction and reconstruction. Raphael begins by considering the way in which feminist categories influence and challenge Jewish reflection on the Holocaust. She contends that Jewish theologians, confronted with the horrors of the Shoah, have tended to focus their discussions on how God's action – or inaction – can be justified. This reflects the typical way in which all theodiscists – Jewish and non-Jewish – proceed. Equally typically, they focus their attention on constructing forms of the Freewill Defence in order to offer some degree of justification for human suffering. Raphael claims that such a position reflects the assumption that it is human freedom and autonomy that defines humanity. She provides examples of the way in which the experience of the death camps is used by such theologians to support the idea that what matters is the extent to which those suffering were able to maintain a sense of their own autonomy and freedom, despite the horrors of their incarceration (Raphael 2004: 137–38).

Raphael's approach is different: reflection on the experience of *women* in the camps leads to an altogether different view of what makes us human. By considering 'the sisterhoods' – groups of women in the death camps who supported each other – she suggests a different account of what it is to be human. It is an account that stresses less the notion of individual freedom, and more the idea of relationship. This perspective allows for a different view of the nature of God: one supported by the Jewish scriptures. Rather than conceptualising God as the ultimate example of a free individual (the image which she believes supports the Freewill Defence), she offers an alternative Jewish concept: that of 'God immanent as Shekinah' (Raphael 2004: 146–47). This is the God whose suffering face is known in the relationships between those in the camps.

Raphael's methodology thus critiques the dominant approach to the Holocaust in Jewish theology by using feminist categories, while at the same time offering an alternative Jewish vision of the nature of God reflecting the feminist concern with relationship. Critically engage with the tradition, and *then* find within the tradition alternative sources for one's theology. Tina Beattie's approach has elements of such an approach, but begins by challenging the way in which feminist philosophers of religion approach the criticism of religion.

If Carol Christ argues for a return to the Goddess, Beattie contends that women need the Virgin Mary (Beattie 2002; 2004). This can seem a surprising conclusion, given the criticisms made by feminists of the mother of Jesus. Mary is, after all, an impossible ideal, the mother who is also a virgin. For Marina Warner (1990), she symbolises all that is wrong with patriarchal accounts of womanhood, where women are defined according to their sexual status, and where problematic sexuality is projected onto the female, thus allowing the male to embody rationality and spirituality.

Beattie sees things differently. The dismissal of Mary reflects a deeper malaise in Western theories of religion. Religion is invariably considered through the lens of Protestantism, and this involves tacit acceptance of the scientific paradigm where all is submitted to the eye of reason, and where the goal is to eradicate mystery. The philosophy of religion – a discipline shaped by the Enlightenment – cannot escape this inheritance; and Beattie has stern words for feminists who she believes have not adequately interrogated the problems for religious reflection of adopting this method (Beattie 2004: 119).

Beattie's approach, by way of contrast, is informed by her Catholicism. This allows for a more positive reading to be given of Mary, where the maternal, excluded from Protestant theology, is restored to its rightful place. Mary's image is seen as expressing the significance of 'the inexpressible mystery of the Incarnation' (Beattie 2004: 112). This might sound decidedly 'unfeminist'. Beattie rejects this claim. Applying the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and the feminism of sexual difference advocated by Irigaray, she argues that Mary's perpetual virginity 'affirms woman's eternal liberation from the power of the phallus/serpent' (ibid. 118). The Virgin Mother is not dependent on a man for her status as mother; her identity is grounded in a genuine female otherness, and thus she provides a powerful example of independent womanhood which conforms to feminist principles.

Beattie's method is thus rather different from Raphael's: critique the assumptions of *feminist* discourse, and then suggest readings for a key aspect of a specific tradition that furthers feminist aims. But more than that: Beattie argues that philosophers of religion need to recognise the unacknowledged specificity of their understanding of religion in Protestant forms of Christianity. Attention must be paid to the way in which cultural and social mores influence the understanding of religion. This necessitates attending to the socio-cultural locatedness of religious traditions just as seriously as we do the gender locatedness of individuals. And in the case of the philosophy of religion it means thinking again about the way in which Protestantism and its focus on right belief may have warped a more rounded view of what religion involves.

Over-emphasising belief at the expense of practice may, as Amy Hollywood (2004) suggests, distort our understanding of religion. It may also, as Beattie claims, have led feminists to misrepresent the role of the Virgin Mary.

This is not to say that Beattie's engagement with Mary is unproblematic. Her concern is to explore the *symbol* of Mary, and in making this the focus for discussion she tends to neglect the uses to which this image has been put. Religion helps shape social identities, and if feminist approaches have been successful at anything it is at drawing our attention to the way in which religion has been used to oppress the powerless, something which seems to be ignored in Beattie's analysis.

Raphael and Beattie both explore the way in which the concept of God relates to the developing identity of human beings. For Raphael, a theology that reflects the significance of relationship can be found within the Jewish tradition. For Beattie, the image of Mary, understood as the Mother of God, can enable the development of female identity. Beattie's approach also suggests something of the willingness of feminist philosophers of religion and theologians to reflect critically upon feminism itself. It is this willingness to critique feminist philosophy of religion that suggests something of the future directions for this approach, and it is worth concluding with some reflections on what those possible futures might look like.

Future directions for feminist philosophy of religion

The success of the feminist approach to the study of religion has been most evident in its exposure of the implications ideas of God have on human identity and society. Early feminist critiques paid attention to the correlation between the concept of God and stereotypes of masculinity, as well as highlighting the implications such ideas have for women. Feminist philosophers of religion have similarly challenged the habitual methods employed by Anglo-American philosophers of religion when they turn their attention to religion. No method is immune, they note, from the concerns of those who formulate it. At the same time, attempts have been made to include desire and reason in the engagement with religion. This places the human subject at the heart of the discussion; a subject who should be understood not as an isolated individual defined purely by the ability to reason, but as an individual always understood through their concrete placing in society and through the relationships that support and define them.

Emphasising the human at the heart of religion goes some way to explaining the feminist focus on identity: both as it is shaped by religion and in the ways it shapes religious beliefs and practices. But if recognition of how embodiment affects philosophy and religion has driven the critique of male-dominated society, feminists are now becoming increasingly aware of how their own specific identities also affect and perhaps distort the discussion of religion.

Academic feminist theology and feminist philosophy of religion has not been immune from the prejudices and hierarchies shaping late-capitalist Western societies. In common with other institutions and disciplines, feminists working in the academy are predominantly white and middle-class. The concerns of educated, professional women may have little to do with the experiences of women whose lives are not shaped by these experiences. If one is in doubt, think of the recent debates surrounding the 'glass ceiling' in the professions: a concern of little moment for women who are not in the professions or themselves middle-class.

Ellen Armour's response is to address such criticisms head-on through exploration of the issue of race. She advocates interrogating the concerns of 'whitefeminists' in order that race might be addressed more systematically than has been the case to date (Armour 1999). Armour argues that whitefeminists tend to ignore the fact that to be white is to be raced, thus enabling the projection of issues arising from race onto Black and Asian women. A false account of woman

that seeks to make all women ‘the same’ and ignores the prejudices Black and Asian women face in racist white society has to be challenged in order that the voices of all are heard and allowed to inform and change our discussions and – more importantly – our practice. As Pamela Sue Anderson (2012: xii) notes, feminists must be more subtle in their analysis of identity, and she urges a deeper engagement with theories of intersectionality:

Gender is inescapably formed by, and recognised where it intersects with, a range of social and material categories, including race, religion, ethnicity, class, age and sexual orientation.

To take gender seriously is not to stop with issues of sex and sexuality. It is to open up all the facets of experience that make us the people we are.

How might this wide-ranging reflection on the nature of identity influence future feminist discussions? To take on board Anderson’s reflections is to recognise how difficult it is to place critical reflections on identity at the heart of our discussions. It is not enough to assume that we can use the position of womanhood or ‘women’s experience’ as a starting point that will lead to the same conclusions for all.

Yet Anderson’s earlier reflections on epistemology suggest a way forward. When she adopts Harding’s standpoint epistemology she suggests something of the complexity of attaining any kind of ‘objective’ truth. To be true, a position has to take account of the variety of perspectives available. A similar method might be used here. Feminism is first and foremost a political movement concerned to expose and correct the marginalisation of women’s lives and experiences and to address gender injustice. The fragmentation of this movement is possible if we become fixated on the things that divide rather than unite us. Anderson’s solution is to adopt a method that thinks through the lives of those placed at the margins. In this sense, she is locating feminist philosophy of religion in the methods of liberation theology that inform the practice of feminist theology. Such a method allows for a deeper and more effective response to the ills that challenge the extent to which *all* women can live full and fulfilling lives. Feminist thinking, viewed in this way, comes out of and is vital for shaping political action; it becomes, as Anderson describes it, ‘a prescription for change’ (Anderson 1998: 119). At a time when the world’s economy is shrinking and when women are feeling the brunt of austerity measures,⁶ the commitment to a united women’s movement that takes account of difference is vital. For feminism to be effective it must think about the things that unite as well as the things that divide women.

That feminist philosophy of religion is a critical movement suggests something of its vibrancy. Feminist philosophers of religion do not rest easy with the identifications and issues that form the basis for current feminist theory. Nothing is set in stone, and the constant engagement and critical reflection upon what it is to be feminist allows for new ideas to develop and to be explored. It is this that ensures its continued importance for contemporary philosophy of religion.

Notes

- 1 The section on ‘Feminist Philosophy of Religion’ in Clack and Clack (2008) forms the basis for this extended and amended chapter.
- 2 Arguably [Valerie Saiving] Goldstein (1960) stands as the first paper of feminist theology. Saiving challenges the construction of sin along gender lines.
- 3 See Clack (ed.) (1999) for examples of the way in which philosophers have defined women.
- 4 See Aquinas in Clack (1999: 74–82).

- 5 This remains a contentious issue between 'Christian Feminists' and 'non-Christian Feminists'. For further discussion of the issues that divide theologians from theologians, see the 'Roundtable' discussion in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 2000, Volume 16 No 2; also *Feminist Theology*, 2005, Volume 13 No 2. In the introduction to the latter, Lisa Isherwood notes that 'this volume has its genesis in the growing unease that appears to exist between theologians and theologians' (p. 133).
- 6 An example from the UK: according to the Fawcett Society, women are bearing the brunt of the fiscal retraction. See their UK Women's Budget Group report 'The Impact on Women of the Coalition Spending Review 2010' (November 2010); also the joint Fawcett Society and Institute for Fiscal Studies Report, 'Single Mothers, Singled Out: The Impact of 2010–15 Tax and Benefit Changes on Women and Men' (June 2011) for supporting statistical analysis.

2

PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACHES TO RELIGION

John Panteleimon Manoussakis

The exact meaning of the adjective ‘phenomenological’ has not always been clear when employed to define an approach to religion. One might assume that it denotes either that particular and quite specific way of looking at things developed by Edmund Husserl, or the school of thought that emerged in the wake of Husserl’s philosophy. And indeed, more often than not, that is precisely the meaning intended. Yet, one can find a less specific employment of the term ‘phenomenological’ that is not related to Husserl’s philosophy at all, nor even to philosophy in general. When employed in this latter case, the term ‘phenomenological’ lacks a specific reference to a system or a method and can mean a number of things, from the non-historical study of religion (religion *as such*) to religion examined independently from other disciplines (Bleeker 1963 and Pettazzoni 1967). In his study on Chantepie de la Saussaye, W. Brede Kristensen, and Gerardus van der Leeuw, George Alfred James (1995) has grouped what appears to be the common characteristic of those phenomenologies of religion under the triptych of the a-historical, the a-theological, and the anti-reductive. In what follows, the term ‘phenomenological’ indicates, explicitly and consistently, the phenomenological method developed by Husserl, and the school of thought that consists of the work of those thinkers influenced by him.

We need now to inquire after the meaning that the term ‘religion’ has when one speaks of ‘phenomenological approaches to religion’. Especially with regard to phenomenology, why should ‘religion’ constitute a distinct field? How are we to distinguish religion, and from what is it to be distinguished? Is religion a subset of a greater category that encompasses or includes religion among other things? Have we not already committed to too much in assuming that religion is one more field or discipline alongside others similar to, or dissimilar from, it? For example, to what extent is religion reducible to aesthetics – if one were to follow the lead of German Idealism – or ethics, as Kant in fact suggested? Do those distinct disciplines correspond to distinct experiences other than religion? Is philosophy itself ‘larger’ than religion, if the latter is to be included in the specification of a ‘philosophy of religion’? In other words, if we were to raise the question of the proper field of philosophy of religion, how can we know that religion is not encroaching upon ethics, as long as the Good has been another name for God, or upon aesthetics (to recall Hölderlin’s assertion that religion is the offspring of the beautiful)?

The singularity of experience and the impossibility of ascribing the classification of 'religious' to any particular class of phenomena

What up to now was mainly a question of interdisciplinary borders and boundaries must be taken to a more fundamental level, that of the singularity of experience. We do not ask whether we can have the experience of more than one thing, but rather whether we can experience anything in a way that would be radically different from that of experience itself. If we have no other recourse to the world than experience – and, in some exceptional cases, non-experience, but this amounts to the same – then we cannot justifiably talk of a phenomenology of religion as if the field for that phenomenology could have been something other than that single experience through which we are able to be in-the-world. Instead, there can be only one and the same field, inasmuch as all phenomenology is a phenomenology of our experience of the world above and beyond the normative classifications of ethics, aesthetics, religion and so on. Yet, even if one were to allow for a distinction among disciplines, fields of study, etc., it would be much harder, if not impossible, to legitimize a similar departmentalization of experience. We cannot speak of multiple experiences even if experience is always manifold. Experience as such cannot be more than one thing. But surely we have an experience of more than one thing. Yes, but whether one experiences the most trivial and mundane thing or the *mysterium tremendum* itself, experience is experience. Therefore, the error we have committed by speaking of a 'phenomenology of religion' becomes immediately apparent, for this determination could make sense only if beforehand we have decided what religion is, which concept, object, moment, or event can qualify as belonging to religion, so as to be properly classified under the description of a 'phenomenology of religion'. But such an *a priori* decision we are unable to make.

To the one, then, who would like to know what kind of phenomena we are willing to admit within such a phenomenology of religion, our answer is *all*. All phenomena are religious for no exclusion can be justified, and therefore all philosophy is a philosophy of religion, if one still wishes to designate it so. We are not talking here of analogous experiences, but rather of 'a radical community' – to use Husserl's phrase – between the objects of experience. This remains the opening gesture of phenomenology, when Husserl (1982: 9) refused to distinguish between objects of eidetic intuition and individual intuition.

The converse side of asserting this impossibility of exclusion – or more correctly, of noting the artificiality of compartmentalizing only *some* phenomena as religious – is to acknowledge the impossibility of any religious experience, that is, the *a priori* impossibility of calling experience 'religious'. It is really an 'either all or nothing'. Either all aspects of experience could be allowed to stand and be analysed as religious phenomena – worship, but also walking; conversion, but also the less dramatic and more difficult-to-describe moments of doubt, agony and falling back in one's old ways that lead to conversation, and so on – or, none of it can be allowed to carry, in and by itself, the designation of a 'religious phenomenon'. In fact, it might be preferable to begin from the acknowledgment of such an *a priori* 'atheism', as one finds it in the work of Jean-Yves Lacoste (2004: 105, 108), because it is only out of such a radical 'either/or', where all or nothing is at stake, that talking about 'religion' can become meaningful again, by losing the self-imposed limitation to a number of phenomena, determined in advance, and then try to discover in that selection what can be constructed out of those phenomena as a characteristic that might justify and explain their designation as 'religious phenomena'. Prayer, rites, rituals, and worship in general, the holy and the sacred, and the divine and its manifestations are all obvious cases, to the study of which a phenomenology of the religious might wish to restrict itself. But on what grounds? Simply because it is customary, and a custom supported by the general consensus, that these phenomena should be read as 'religious'? But then it is not the

phenomena themselves that manifest religion, but religion that is allowed to choose its representatives. We ask again, on what grounds? One sympathetic to religion might be surprised to discover that, if we suspend religion's judgment and let the phenomena speak for themselves – *all* of the phenomena, as now we cannot draw any line – then a much greater spectrum of experience comes forth to testify for religion, in a way that 'religion' could not have possibly done for itself, and in a way that shows that talking about 'religion' (or a 'phenomenology of religion') as a distinct realm of experience makes little sense.

Perhaps it would be better to leave aside the terminology of partiality – e.g., philosophy as distinct from religion, religion as distinct from philosophy – and say that what we propose is nothing less than exposing the 'religious' (for lack of any other word) foundations of consciousness as such.

Attempts at a phenomenology of religion

The problem of defining what religion is arose at the same time as the first works that tried to examine religion by adopting a scientific perspective – be it psychological, anthropological, or sociological – attempted to establish a science of religion: a *threskeiology*. In other words, the problem of what constitutes a religious phenomenon arises only from within the religious attitude, as we would say in phenomenological language, in the same way that busying oneself with numbers exists only for the arithmetical world and the arithmetical attitude (Husserl, 1982: 54); but this implies the suspension of the lived world – thus a host of problems, underlined below, emerge. We have at the beginning of the twentieth century several remarkable examples of such an attempt to define religion: James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901–2), Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), Otto's *The Idea of the Holy* (1917), Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913/1918) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), and Eliade's *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957/1959). What all these works seek is to describe the citadel of religion without entering it, let alone sojourning in it. But it is naïve to expect that an aspect of life might be objectified – turned into a specimen for analytical observation removed and separated from the roots that nourished it – and yet also continue to present the same properties that it possessed when it was alive. The 'study of religion' is, of course, not religion. Still less is it faith, prayer, and liturgy. It would be intolerable to commit the same disrespectful act towards philosophy, for example, in attempting to make a 'study of wisdom' out of it. The result of such an attempt would be either a *sophiology* or a *philology*, but neither is philosophy. So, too, with *threskeiology* – it has little, or rather absolutely nothing, to do with that experience one calls 'religion'. To repeat the point differently: what is lifeless, especially *qua* lifeless, cannot hope to live life, nor can the person who has not loved or been loved be granted access to what he has deliberately denounced in the vain hopes of understanding. Alberich can grasp the power that all knowledge is only at the expense of forsaking love.

The distinction between sacred and secular

The definition of 'religion' as pertaining to things sacred, in contradistinction to the profane, was formulated by Durkheim (1976: 37) and followed by Eliade. 'This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought.' I wonder why Durkheim did not have the insight to apply to the pair 'sacred'/'profane' the same line of arguments he so successfully employed against the pair 'natural'/'supernatural'. Eliade's study of sacred space and sacred time, furnished by numerous examples, cannot but be convincing. Yet, it would be difficult to admit that man experiences such a

dramatic bifurcation of his life, even if one is to speak here only of the 'religious man'. The world he inhabits is, after all, *one* world, and the distinction between sacred and profane realms, useful as it might be, seems to apply more to our studies than to our experience. For in that experience one could either acknowledge the 'sacredness' of time or deny it; but to admit that at some times time is sacred, but at other times it is not, presents us with the impossibility of two times and two spaces whose origins and characters are to be accounted for differently. There is, obviously, a time of feasting and no one would doubt that such a time is dedicated to the gods and their festivals, yet the time of fasting finds its meaning also in a similar association. There is, no doubt, the sacred space of altars, temples, and churches, but, ultimately, is not the whole world a sacred space?

Our criticism, in short, is that the distinction between sacred and profane is secondary and artificial. Notice, for example, the difficulty with which Durkheim is confronted, as soon as he declares that very distinction, in explaining what makes a thing either sacred or profane, especially since, as he is astute enough to state himself, the same thing could be classified under either of these categories. The reader looks in vain to find an explanation of what bestows the status of the sacred on any particular phenomenon. Both Durkheim and Eliade provide us with descriptions, but they fail to offer an explanation or a definition of religious phenomena. Yet, descriptions can point to what is sacred only after it has been recognized as such, and therefore they help us when what is at stake is the *manifestation* of the religious itself.

Durkheim insists that the difference between sacred and profane is not a difference of degrees, as, for example, the difference between good and evil, but rather an *absolute* difference of kind. Eliade, too, talks of a 'solution of continuity' between these two realms. Yet, such sharp distinctions cannot but amount to a resuscitation of the old Gnostic dualism. Perhaps both authors share the conviction that religion is ultimately and fundamentally gnostic, and perhaps this conviction contains a kernel of truth, as long as one allows for the exemption of Christianity.

The sacred and the holy

What calls for such an exemption is the concept of the holy (sanctity, *sanctus*) insofar as it renders the distinction between the sacred and the profane problematic, since such a distinction cannot account for the holy. Is something by its very nature or essence sacred or does it become so? Durkheim explicitly states that the sacred does not constitute a particular class of objects but rather a characteristic that potentially any object could assume. How does an object acquire the characteristic of the sacred? By the logic of *sacrifice* (literally 'to make sacred')! The sacred (*sacer*) presides over a cluster of notions and practices that are indeed at the core of the religious, such as sacrifice and consecration. A sacrifice is the ritualistic killing of the sacrificial victim, whether it is a human being or an animal, and therefore the act of setting it aside from the realm of the living. The sacrifice is primarily concerned with the distinction between life and death and constitutes the permissible transgression of that distinction. Once sacrificed, the victim becomes consecrated: it is set, in other words, on the other side of the profane and its profane use. The same logic applies to non-animal sacrifices, such as food, objects, and buildings that are consecrated. Whatever is thus consecrated is dedicated – to 'dedicate' and to 'consecrate', in religious language, denote roughly the same thing – to the gods. Thus, yet another polarity emerges between what belongs to the gods and what belongs to the mortals.

To follow Durkheim's (and later Eliade's) logic, the distinction between sacred and profane, once prompted, opens up to a number of further distinctions – such as between life and death, gods and humans, etc. – all already implicit in that primary distinction. The logic of separation, exemplified in the rite of sacrifice, however, must be complemented with its opposite (such is the demand of every totality); that is, that of transgressing the very opposition that the sacred

safeguards: the name of that transgression is *sorcery*. Now it becomes clear why as soon as Durkheim has defined ‘religion’ as ‘the sacred’ he is faced at once with the problem of magic and his failed ways to distinguish it from religion. Lévinas (1990: 141) confirms the association of sorcery with the sacred, as the sacred’s ‘first cousin, perhaps even sister’.

Within the ‘sacred’/‘profane’ distinction, therefore, one discovers the alliance between the sacred and the sorcerous. Against that alliance, and therefore outside of the ‘sacred’/‘profane’ distinction, stands the holy (sanctity, the saintly). The word *sanctus* (saint, sanctity, sanction) is in fact etymologically related to *sacer* (the sacred). The word ‘holy’, on the other hand, comes from a different root, that of *Heilig*, which denotes that which is ‘whole’ (the holy and the whole are related) and also ‘healthy’ (thus without blemishes). However, even within Latin use, *sanctus* and *sacer* were not synonyms. The former denotes a *symbolic* quality – the sanction of the law, the sanctification of a practice, and so on – while the latter a *natural* quality. This distinction between natural and symbolic is very important; we will see that, ultimately, ‘religion’ – here the term is restricted to certain ‘natural’ religions – is ‘natural’, that is, it focuses on what is natural, it is concerned with nature, etc., while there still remains the possibility of a ‘religious’ overcoming of religion. Such an overcoming is represented by the holy which is neither sacred nor profane and which, one could argue, can be both sacred and profane at once. On the other hand, the distinction between sacred and profane remains within the boundaries of nature and the natural (the supernatural included). The overcoming of the natural is not the supernatural but the historical. And it is on the side of history that we have to look for the overcoming of the ‘religious’ understood as a natural property.

In light of the foregoing discussion one should resist the temptation to provide a definition of religious phenomenon, most importantly because religious phenomena do not constitute a particular class. The characterization of any phenomena as ‘religious’ pertains to *signification* and not to *manifestation* as such (without wishing to suggest that the two are unrelated). Does this mean that religious phenomena and religion as a whole are subjective? They can *only* be subjective – but the term ‘subjective’ here does not have the connotations which it carries in everyday parlance, namely of something dubious, imaginary, or unreal. Rather the religious character of phenomena is subjective in the same sense that history and language can be said to be so, that is, grounded on a subject – yet, as we will see below, on a subject without subjectivity.

A paradigm shift: discovering religion ‘in’ the conscience

The ‘religious’ character of phenomena is not something like a sensational property, like the colour or the sound of a perceived object, for instance. It makes, therefore, no sense to deny or affirm the religious character of phenomena, as if such character were something to be discovered *in* them. Rather, the characterization of any phenomenon as religious is not decided, so to speak, on the side of the phenomenon itself, but on the side of him or her for whom it constitutes an experience and *to whom* it is *given*. In other words, there are no religious phenomena, but only a religious disposition to phenomena in response to the givenness that constitutes the core of the phenomenological revelation. Such a disposition is universal, that is, part and parcel of the constitution of conscience as such.

Givenness, relation, and the call

In the first formulation of his own ‘broadening’ of the phenomenological reduction, Jean-Luc Marion discovers a horizon more essential than, and thus anterior to, transcendental consciousness (Husserl) and being (Heidegger). What constitutes phenomena and, by extension, what constitutes

me as the recipient of these phenomena, is neither the intending character of the consciousness paired with the phenomenon's intuition, nor is it the opening of Dasein to the nothingness of Being disclosed by anxiety and boredom, but rather the claim addressed to me by 'the pure form of the call'. Thus Marion (1998: 197–98) writes 'that which gives itself gives itself only to the one who gives himself over to the call and only in the pure form of a confirmation of the call, which is repeated because received'. Marion's discussion of the call is indebted to Heidegger's analysis of the character of conscience as a call that calls Dasein to itself, a call that 'comes from me yet it calls from beyond me', as section 57 of *Being and Time* famously stated. Yet, Marion radicalizes Heidegger's analysis by emphasizing that the very receptivity of the call is constitutive of a subject without subjectivity (for the subject is neither a being nor a consciousness). It should be noted that the subject does not even exist prior to the call, for 'giving himself over to the call' means, first and foremost, to 'be given a self by the call'. The self that gives himself over to the call does not even have himself; in order, then, to give himself over to the call he has to be given that self. In fact, this is not about a sequence, logical or chronological: the self is not first given in order to be later given up, but rather the self is given as much and insofar as it is given up. For the self too, or rather the self above all, must be given.

Indeed, the gifted (*l'adonné*) is called to existence as a response to a call (*l'interloqué*) that calls it to being. 'Thus is born the gifted', writes Marion (2002b: 268), 'whom the call makes the successor to the "subject", as what receives itself entirely from what it receives'. The summon of the call, the resulting surprise, the call itself, and its facticity – this fourfold of the phenomenology of givenness – implies a self given to oneself by an origin that precedes and predates it and, at the same time, the paradox of a self who, in receiving itself, precedes also and predates itself.

The call, exemplifying what is known as an 'inverse intentionality', summons me to myself. It summons me, neither to a diluted subjectivity where no taste of particularity can be detected, nor to the ontological uniformity of one-size-fits-all, but rather to myself, that is, to the irreducible, irreplaceable specificity of my thisness. 'The passage from the nominative [of the subject] to the objective cases (accusative, dative)', Marion notes, 'inverts the hierarchy of the metaphysical categories' (2002b: 268). But how? And what may be the implications of such an inversion? Is the project of Marion's reduction based only on a grammatical whim? Certainly not! What is at stake here is far more radical than any Copernican revolution. Marion (2002b: 268) explains it in what, in our opinion, might be the most far-reaching claim of his phenomenology: 'Individualized essence (*ousia prote*) no longer precedes relation (*pros ti*) and no longer excludes it from its ontic perfection. In contrast, relation here precedes individuality' and, as he adds a few sentences later, results from it.

Alluding to Dionysius' *Divine Names*, we could say that the self is like the name. A self must be given as a name is always given – we speak of somebody's 'given name' – and never assumed by myself. I cannot name myself unless the Other first gives me my name, by calling me – my parents after my birth, the priest in my baptism, the abbot in my tonsure – thus giving my self to myself. In the absence of others there is neither name nor self. To be given a name indicates one's beginning, in my name I acknowledge that I am generated, derived and dependent; the fact that I have a name by which the Other can call me implies that the Other has laid a claim over me, that I belong not to myself but to the Other from whom I received not only my name – my name, after all, is a constant confession of this debt – but also my self. A name is always given and therefore it can never be a proper name – for my name does not belong to me, not only insofar as it is given to me but also insofar as it has named others before me and it will name others after me. However, 'in this way, the baptismal given name, the "proper" name par excellence, results from a call (one calls me with the name of such a saint) because,

more essentially, this name constitutes a call in itself – I would not be called simply *by* this name, but indeed *to* this name’ (Marion 2002b: 292).

Only God has no name for God has no beginning. Who was there before God in order to name Him? To give God a name would imply that oneself is prior to or higher than God, but such a ‘God’ would only be an idol, for he who names God creates ‘God’, that is, he erects for himself an idol. God is strictly anonymous (as the *Divine Names* make clear) or, and this amounts to the same thing, polyonymous (Marion 2001: 142). Marion’s early critique of conceptual and metaphysical idolization – cf., *God Without Being* and *The Idol and Distance* – finds its complementary gesture in the critique of subjectivity, for the subject is the idol of (one)self.

It is precisely the death of such idolatry, the idolatry of the self-subsisting subject, that the triple immersion in the baptismal waters effects so that the new person who emerges from death can now receive not only a name, but a new identity ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ which is an identity inscribed within a community, a personal identity, since it is given by the invocation of three Persons, given as a gift and not claimed as a possession. For ‘what do you have that you did not receive?’ (1 Cor. 4:7).

After the call to biological existence and the call to ecclesial life there is finally one last call: ‘I tell you the truth, a time is coming and has now come when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear will live’ (John 5:25). Here, then, lies the whole question of the call, for ‘the dead will hear the voice’. How are the dead to hear the voice that calls them to everlasting life? How is the voice to penetrate the dead ears which hear nothing? To play with this paradox, we could say that only the dead ear hears; that unless one has become (like the) dead one would not hear the call. Indeed, receptivity to the call presupposes an unconditional passibility, such that one could compare it only to the absolute passivity of the dead. As in the *Mystical Theology*, one ascends higher by leaving behind more and more of oneself, that is, of one’s own categories, concepts, and images so as to arrive at the summit of *apphaeresis* naked of all conceptual armoury, so here we will hear the voice that calls to life once we have silenced our voice and have mortified the activities of the subject, once our intending consciousness ceases to search and returns upon itself by means of an inverse intentionality that allows it only to receive, to hear the call and by hearing it to live. The domain of the call, particularly of the divine call, extends from before birth (cf., Luke 1:13) to after death (cf., John 11:43; Luke 7:14) and thus proves itself of being unrestricted by what we might take to be life’s absolute termini. Similarly, though, the one called, the one to whom the call is addressed is shown to be more than his being, for, in a sense, he precedes his birth and survives his death. Thus the call has displayed the insufficiency of being or consciousness in counting as the ground of selfhood. The *interloqué* is ‘man without being’ as the call that constitutes him comes ultimately from the ‘God without being’.

The foregoing analysis might give to our discussion of the call a particular color that is not entirely accurate. It might, in other words, give the false impression that the call is restricted to one category, that of religious or ethical phenomena; for instance, the ‘call of conscience’ or vocation as a ‘calling’. Against this assumption, we must emphasize that the call is above all a property of the visible, or better yet, the call becomes most noticeable as the visible. By this we mean not that everything that appears is the call, but rather that whatever appears – from everyday things, like chairs and books, to ideas, emotions and state of things – appears because it addresses us a call. A silent face in a café, a painting in a museum, an exam that I need to take, all of these appear by means of a certain call, to which I can respond in different ways. The call is not only what calls our attention, but also what fails to do so, the unnoticed and the unnoticeable; the call is not only the pleasing or the interesting, but also what one finds unpleasant or boring. Therefore, it makes all the more of a paradox to say that the call is the beautiful.

Of course, one knows since Kant that the beautiful is not to be identified with pleasure, and von Balthasar does not hesitate to take even ugliness as a manifestation of God's glory (the unsurpassable example of such a paradox is, of course, the cross). But what does it mean that the call is the beautiful? Indeed, what else can the beautiful be than what calls? And, how else is one to understand the ability of the call to call if not by means of beauty? Language tells us that much when it indicates that the derivation of 'the beautiful' (*to kalon*) comes from the verb 'to call' (*kaleo, kalein*). Naturally, if we understand beauty as symmetry or proportion, as harmony of color or sound, it would be difficult, indeed impossible, to explain the catholicity of the beautiful as the call that calls through the visible, even when it is not a question of harmony or symmetry. These 'scientific' explanations, as Socrates somewhat scornfully calls them in the *Phaedo*, are descriptive at best of the ways in which beauty is perceived, that is, they explain only the 'mechanics' of the aesthetic phenomenon, but fail to answer the question why we call something beautiful, let alone the question what beauty is in itself. Plato, therefore, rejects these questions as insufficient and confusing, Kant rejects them for threatening beauty's universality, and phenomenology rejects them for imposing limitations that are inadmissible within the reduction. The only two answers to the question of beauty that merit some consideration are those given to us by Plato (c. 350 BCE/2002) in his *Phaedo* and Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. For Plato (100d: 7–8) 'what is beautiful is beautiful by the beautiful'. Of course, such a statement is heavily in need of interpretation. One has learned to see in this answer Plato's so-called theory of forms. The beautiful, then, by which anything becomes beautiful, is taken to be the form of beauty. This already implies that what makes something beautiful is not itself, i.e., it is not to be found in the thing itself, but rather comes from beyond, it is other than the thing that one perceives as beautiful. Surprisingly, Kant (1790/1987: 62, 64, and 221) gives a very similar answer when he refuses to assign beauty as the property of a thing. For him, too, beauty is external and a sign of exteriority. Both Plato and Kant seem to converge on another point: that beauty is teleological. It is unnecessary to rehearse here the movements of Kantian teleology – suffice to say that it is solely the teleological character of the beautiful that maintains the coherence of an otherwise disparate *Critique*, divided, as it is, between aesthetic and teleological judgments. To see a similar notion in Plato's treatment of the beautiful, we need to remind ourselves of the context within which he discusses beauty: it is the famous episode where Socrates gives a brief account of his philosophical autobiography and of his encounter with Anaxagoras' teleology in particular. Socrates believes that in Anaxagoras he has found the only tenable answer as to the cause of things, that is, *perfection* ('for if one wished to know the cause of each thing ... one had only to find what was best for it' 97c). His later disillusionment with Anaxagoras leads Socrates to the famous 'second sailing' that consists of an investigation into the *logoi* of things, the latter being, as it is made clear in the dialogue, their final causes (thus, every form for Plato ought to be understood as a final cause). For the remaining pages of the dialogue, Plato singles out one particular form, that of beauty, which, by calling everything to itself, makes everything that heeds its call – and everything to some degree is – beautiful.

Dionysius (the Pseudo-Aeropagite) is situated in the middle of the distance between Plato and Kant. His beautiful is not anymore as impersonal as Plato's form, nor has it been yet depersonalized as Kant's *a priori* idea of purposiveness. For Dionysius the beautiful is a person, God Himself:

The beautiful [*kalon*] that is beyond all being is called beautiful [*kallos*] on account of its own beauty that it transmits to each and every thing and for being accountable for the harmony and brilliance of all as the light that shines to everything its radiating rays

and for calling [*kaloun*] everything to itself and gathering everything and in every respect, for which reason it has been called beautiful [*kallos*].

(*On the Divine Names*, IV 7, 701C)

Therefore, if the beautiful is recognized as beautiful, it is because it renders itself visible (i.e., it ‘calls’ to itself) and, by the same token, what is visible, what appears in appearance and by appearing ‘calls’ to itself, is only the beautiful. Dionysius’s passage distinguishes between these two (simultaneous) movements clearly: the beautiful radiates ‘like the light’ – thus it renders everything visible, indeed it is the condition of visibility – but also recollects everything to itself, now strictly in its capacity as the ‘beautiful’ – that is, as a call from the future.

It is this double movement of the beautiful/visible that Marion’s phenomenology of saturation retrieves. What these phenomena are saturated with is the excess of the givenness of the phenomenon itself – it is an excess of intuition, a surplus of information we would say, that saturates them. This, however, does not mean that we have to look far for saturated phenomena, not, in particular, among the exotic, the extraordinary, and the bizarre. Saturated phenomena are not a special group of phenomena, but any phenomena seen without the protective glasses of regulatory concepts and preconceived intentionalities. Every phenomenon is inexhaustible – there is no viewing of a painting that is ever final, as there is no performance of a composition that is definitive; there is no event that can be transfixed into a single interpretation and, above all, there is no Other that would fit comfortably in one of my categories. We now understand that saturation is complemented by and, indeed, results in some kind of negation (negative theology). The task of the phenomenologist of the abundant givenness is similar to the theologian of the divine names: never-ending, or, as one could say after Gregory of Nyssa, *epetatic*. Everything always gives more than one can receive – it is this generosity of phenomenality that necessitates revision, repetition, interpretation and finally, what gives rise to philosophy itself, wonder. This fecundity of intuition surrounds every phenomenon as if it were a halo of excessive visibility – a metaphor often evoked by Husserl himself in his *Ideas* – a mandorla of light, that transforms phenomena, or, better yet, renders them visible. For, phenomenologically speaking, in order to see what is seen, one must also ‘see’ what one cannot see, what remains unseen and as such shows the visible. There is no doubt that the theme of the abundance and irreducibility of donation as well as the chiasmic intertwining of the visible and the invisible bear a strong affinity with a theological worldview. For ultimately the phenomenon of revelation conditions the revelation of the phenomena.

Perfection

If, indeed, only the end (in the double sense of *telos* as finality and purposiveness) makes things perfect (*teleia*), then purpose keeps reminding us of such perfection amidst incompleteness and imperfection. It is as if the human mind were indeed made in such a way as to understand only the perfect and the complete. For even if this is lacking in the present state of things – and it can only be lacking – it feels compelled to supply it by itself. Memory and anticipation are both mediums of ‘idealization’, that is, of bestowing perfection upon the thing remembered or expected that, once presented, the thing lacks. Hence the disenchantment that follows every realized expectation.

The perception of any physical thing, that is, any perception in space, ‘involves a certain inadequacy’ (Husserl 1982: 94). By this, Husserl means that what I see is always necessarily partial, for I can never grasp what I see fully, from every single angle, in every possible way an object can show itself to me. This partiality, this imperfection endemic to perception itself, is a limitation necessitated by the limitations that are imposed on both me, as the perceiver, and the

object of my perception, on account of our respective embodiments. However, the same imperfection perpetuates a series of inexhaustible possible perceptions ‘which can always be continued’ and ‘which are never completed’ (1982: 91). This characteristic alone is enough to become the criterion of distinguishing between two kinds of beings: being as a physical thing, and being as an act of consciousness (for example, the distinction between the perception of a thing and the consciousness of that perception). The former is always given through a multiplicity of adumbrations, the latter can never be perceived adumbrated.

Yet, even if the act of perception can never be completed, what is perceived cannot but be comprehended *as if* it were complete. For I never see the book that lies on my desk as the one-sided, two-dimensional patch of blue color on my visual field – *that* would amount to not seeing the book at all – but as an object in which all its characteristics, properties, and angles are somehow presented in a unified way, such that my gazing alone can never discover, and not of any shortcoming on its account, but precisely because at no given instant, at no given perception, could any object be so presented. From where does such completeness come? The answer can only be: from the consciousness itself.

‘When I perceive simply, moving about in my environmental world, when I see houses, for example, I do not first see houses primarily and expressly in their individuation, in their distinctiveness [and thus, in their incompleteness]. Rather, I first see universally: this is a house’ (Heidegger 1985: 66–67). What Heidegger alludes here is the eidetic intuition of ‘the essence of any empirically possible or impossible house’ that is given together with the intuition of that particular house in front of me. As Marion (1998: 14) explains: ‘I see *the* house, *as* house, before seeing (and in order to see) *a* house; or rather, the *as* of the house precedes a particular house and allows it to appear as such’. Indeed, intuition always gives more than one suspects – for it presents us the world at least twofold: in its particularity and in its universality; in its particularity *through* its universality. What I see, then, when I see this or that is never the particular thing in itself but the thing in its eidetic horizon without which that thing in itself would be, strictly speaking, invisible. What allows things to appear as the things they are is the surplus of such eidetic intuition, an intuition that regards their *eidōs*. Yet such a regard is not a gaze upward as it was supposedly for the Platonic philosopher in search of his forms, but a gaze forward to the eschatological perfection of things. The *eidōs* of a thing is the thing as given within a horizon of perfection and completion, that is, a state that a thing can have only at the end when completed and perfected. So we read in St Augustine (1953: 253):

True equality and similitude, true and primal unity, are not perceived by the eye of flesh or by any bodily sense, but are known by the mind. How is equality of any kind demanded in bodies, and how are we convinced that any equality that may be seen there is far different from perfect equality, unless the mind sees that which is perfect? If indeed that which is not made [*facta*] can be called perfect [*perfecta*].

A little more needs to be said here by way of an explanation of temporality’s role which, even though implicit throughout the foregoing analysis, has not yet been thematized as such. The very notion of perfection implies, on its most basic, etymological level, a terminus or a *telos* reached over a period of time and by means of such time (*per-factum*), and thus *finished*. Perfection is an end-of-time category. To say this does not necessary imply an absolute, ‘end of times’ (in plural) scenario, although all teleologies draw their meaning from within such an eschatological perspective. It simply means that perfection as a finishing that has been now finished cannot be looked for at the beginning. No beginning *qua* beginning can be perfect. Perfection is inseparably connected to the notion of time and, more particularly, to time as time passed. To the phenomenological eye,

perfection is not presented by the things themselves – which, as we have seen, are always and necessarily given through inexhaustible albeit partial chiaroscuro of perception – but it is supplemented by consciousness, a consciousness for which each and every of its cogitations are always equally necessarily presented in the flow of time:

In itself *every mental process* [Erlebnis] is a flux of becoming, is what it is in a *generation originaliter* of an invariant essential type; it is a continuous flow of retentions and protentions mediated by a flowing phase of originarity itself in which there is consciousness of the living now of the mental process in contradistinction to its ‘before’ and ‘after’.
(Husserl 1982: 179)

The ‘continuous flow of retentions and protentions’ that consciousness essentially is does not move in a simple linear fashion – as our naïve conceptions of time might have it – from past to present to future (or from future to past to present!), but rather forms a highly complex pattern wherein the three dimensions of time are interwoven perichoretically, so that every ‘now’ contains a retention of the ‘having been’ as well as a protention of the ‘about to be’. In turn, each retention as well as each protention is pregnant with a similar tripartition of the now, the before and the after, and so on. One could give the example of comprehending the verse of a poem as one recites it: obviously one cannot utter all the syllables that make up any given verse – let alone all verses – of the poem at once, but during each one of them, as one sound is followed by another, the words spoken are retained in the words one now speaks, and the words yet unspoken are anticipated in the words one now speaks. The example is a favorite of St Augustine who is using it in order to illustrate the passing of time in the famous discussion of time in the *Confessions*. Yet we find a more apt employment of the same metaphor in some other of his works. For example, in *De Vera Religione* Augustine (1953: 245) writes:

A line of poetry is beautiful in its own way though no two syllables can be spoken at the same time. The second cannot be spoken till the first is finished. So in due order the end of the line is reached. When the last syllable is spoken the previous ones are not heard at the same time, and yet along with the preceding ones it makes the form and metrical arrangement *complete*.

That St Augustine is using some proto-phenomenological skills in his observations is confirmed by Maurice Merleau-Ponty who, centuries after Augustine, used this very metaphor about signification: we understand the beginning of a sentence from its end, Merleau-Ponty reminds us, as we understand movement in light of its teleological direction (2011: 205).

How are we to understand this ability of the mind to see perfection when perfection is lacking? It is precisely at this point that we need to turn to a phenomenological inquiry of the teleological. It would seem that the first (that is, the most fundamental and the most readily available) intuition of eschatology is that of awaiting or expecting (‘the hoped for’, or even the ‘unhoped for’, as in the work of Jean-Louis Chrétien). But what would such an intuition have been without the idea of purpose, that is, of fulfillment of one’s anticipation, even if we were not to know what or whom we are waiting for? More fundamental than waiting is this waiting-for, that is, the structure of a purpose. Whence can we phenomenologically derive such a structure? First of all, from the very character of intending. Intentionality, even prior to intending this or that, always intends a purpose; in fact, it is purposive (Husserl 1982: §86). In every fulfillment, in every filled intention, one can observe the structure of the teleological. Kant (1987: 31, 68) spoke of pleasure precisely in these terms, and we believe that it is the joy

of the kingdom to come that is foreshadowed in the feeling of satisfaction that every filled anticipation yields. 'All pleasures', after all 'have within themselves some feeling of perfection' (Leibniz 2007: 145–46), and, as we have seen, perfection is a teleological category. The very passage from an empty intention to a filled one, that is, the passage from absence to presence, is such a teleological indication, for in all these common structures of anticipation the absolute anticipation, i.e., the anticipation of the absolute, is reflected (Husserl 1970: §22).

Teleology is, of course, one of the oldest 'proofs' of the existence of God in the book: from St Thomas Aquinas' fifth way to Leibniz's 'principle of the best'. Nevertheless, it was believed to have been entirely discredited as an argument when it was shown that purposiveness cannot objectively be found 'out there' – that is, independently of the human mind. It must, therefore, be *only* in the mind and a thing of the mind. Nothing would delight us more than this conclusion. Its supporter might have thought that it achieved a decisive blow against teleology, without realizing that he had furnished it instead with its strongest defence. For to say that teleology is a property of the mind is to elevate it, as we have tried to show, to a universal structure of human consciousness. Consciousness first projects perfection in the world and only then, on the basis of such projection, discovers a teleological perfection in the things themselves. So far consciousness had failed to recognize purposiveness as its own essential characteristic and therefore, mistook it as a property of a world assumed to be external to itself. Let this mistake be corrected by the Copernican Revolution that phenomenology brings about, and let teleology, so understood, become the first indication of what could be called the *theological constitution of consciousness*.

3

POSTMODERN APPROACHES TO RELIGION

N.N. Trakakis

The postmodern condition

‘Postmodernism is passé! Like every other fad, its time came and went. But it had a disastrous effect on culture, politics and especially on education and serious scholarship, and so we are glad to have gotten rid of it, once and for all! Postmodernism is irrational and nihilistic, and now that we are over it there is no turning back!’

Perhaps that is how many look back on postmodernism today. Philosophers, and not only Anglo-American analytic philosophers (consider Alain Badiou and Slavoj Žižek), continue to be highly critical of postmodernism, although there remain some loyal followers who insist that the phenomenon of postmodernism was flagrantly misunderstood and viewed aright can be seen as a positive and salutary response to the deficiencies and failures of modern thought and society. In this chapter I wish to enter the fray but in a somewhat circumspect way, confining myself to a specific manifestation of postmodernism in contemporary philosophy of religion – viz., the work of John Caputo, and more specifically still, the later work of Caputo, which has been heavily inflected by the postmodern philosophy of Jacques Derrida. But, to begin with, some clarification is required about the very term ‘postmodernism’ – a word which, as Caputo (1997: 119) notes, has ‘been ground into senselessness by opportunistic overuse.’¹

Although it is an amorphous and notoriously difficult term to define, ‘postmodernism’ typically refers to a movement or cultural force which rose to prominence in the late twentieth century (especially the 1980s and 90s) and had a great impact on a diverse number of fields – including literature, literary theory, the visual arts, architecture, philosophy, and even the natural sciences.² The prefix ‘post-’ is sometimes taken to imply a radical break or rupture with modernism, while on more moderate readings it signifies only a turn within or reconfiguration of modernism, not a complete rupture. As this account of postmodernism indicates, perhaps the best way of understanding this phenomenon is in relation to that which it supersedes (or opposes, or intensifies): modernism, modernity.³

Understood fairly broadly, ‘modernism’ refers to the values, practices, and institutions of the West that begin to emerge at the end of the medieval period in the fifteenth century and become dominant in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This is a period of profound socio-economic change, with the Industrial Revolution (begun in England in the eighteenth century) leading to major technological developments (in, e.g., transportation and communication – the

automobile, the radio, etc.) and a consequent shift from an agrarian economy to one dominated by industry and the mass production of manufactured goods. In some places (e.g., the United States) this coincided with the rapid development of capitalism, while elsewhere (e.g., in the former Soviet Union) these social changes were underwritten by the Marxist belief in progress and human emancipation. In either case, an older (medieval or pre-modern) worldview founded upon the Judeo-Christian tradition was being 'disenchanted' or secularized in favour of a new 'faith' – the Enlightenment of the seventeenth–eighteenth centuries. In the writings of Enlightenment thinkers (such as Kant, Hume, Voltaire, and Diderot) there is evident 'a certain faith in reason, a reason that took scientific objectivity and method as its touchstones' (Westphal 2001: 78). In the wake of the 'scientific revolution' of the fifteenth–seventeenth centuries, Enlightenment philosophers emphasized the primacy of rational and empirical enquiry as opposed to the authority of religious institutions and texts in yielding knowledge of universal truths and values. Tradition was now replaced by change and novelty, as witnessed in the attempts of modernist art to break free from past traditions of representation, so as to make room for experimentation, innovation, individualism and originality – values embodied in such movements as impressionism in France in the late nineteenth century, and cubism in the work of, e.g., Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque in the early twentieth century.

Soon after World War II, with the advent of the post-industrial age (globalization, consumer and multinational capitalism, mass media and information technologies, etc.), what became known as 'the postmodern condition' (after Jean-François Lyotard's influential 1979 book) began to set in. Faith in the Enlightenment ideals of 'truth' and 'reason', and the grand 'meta-narratives' of historical progress to which they gave birth, began to be viewed with incredulous eyes as oppressive and 'totalizing'. The Holocaust, the Soviet Gulags, the imminent ecological disaster and other 'failures of modernity' of course did much to bring about this paradigm shift. But other historical events that are often identified as watershed moments in this respect include the heated political climate of the late 1960s–early 1970s (e.g., the student riots in May 1968 in Paris, and more generally the counterculture movement and its opposition to the Vietnam War), and even the demolition in 1972 of several multi-story housing developments built in St. Louis, Missouri according to the 'International Style' of Henri Le Corbusier, who wanted homes to be 'machines for modern living'. Dissatisfied with the cold formalism of such modernist architecture – with its minimalism (for Mies van der Rohe, 'less is more'), repetition of simple shapes, uniformity of design, and use of harsh, industrial-looking materials with little ornamentation (just cubes and triangles) – architects sought to reintroduce elements of humanity and historical reference, and even playfulness and irony, in designs which mix the classical and the popular, thus collapsing the distinction between high and low culture. A similar eclecticism is found in the 'Pop Art' of Andy Warhol, with his use of ready-made imagery from advertising and magazines. Warhol also contested the value and indeed the very notion of originality (or 'one-offs') through his mechanical reproduction of images, produced in the assembly-line he aptly called 'The Factory'.

Postmodern philosophy

The foregoing indicates something of the mood and sensibility, if not also the ideas and positions, of postmodern artists and thinkers. But now I wish to delve deeper into the theoretical basis of postmodernism, focusing in particular on its 'philosophy' – the specific philosophical assumptions and principles at play in postmodern theory. An initial problem faced by such an undertaking is that there is no single postmodern philosophy, but a multitude of versions and variations, some comparatively modest and modernist, others more extreme and anti-modern. Nevertheless, to

make a start and mainly for heuristic purposes, it may help to enumerate some of the elements that are often thought to make up postmodern philosophy.

In its origins (in the late 1960s and early 70s), postmodern philosophy was an almost exclusively French affair, dominated by the writings of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jean Baudrillard, and Luce Irigaray, before being transplanted to other parts of the world. In France, it was closely aligned to the poststructuralist movement, and was very much influenced by the so-called ‘new Nietzsche’, the post-World War II interpretations of Nietzsche inaugurated by Bataille and Klossowski (see Allison 1977, and Woodward 2011: Ch. 2). But how is the philosophical outlook of postmodernism to be characterized? Considered negatively, postmodern philosophy stands in opposition to modern philosophy as inaugurated by Locke and Descartes in the seventeenth century and culminating in Enlightenment thinkers such as Kant and the French *philosophes* in the eighteenth century. More specifically, postmodern philosophy opposes views such as the following (there is much overlap here, and some key terms will be explicated only very briefly):

- *Foundationalism*: the view that our beliefs can be grounded in firm and stable foundations, which provide absolute knowledge and certainty.
- *Essentialism*: the view that all things have essential characteristics or natures, which are universal and timeless in the sense that they transcend historical and cultural particularities.
- *Realism*: the commonsensical view that there is an objective world or mind-independent reality, and that there are facts regarding the nature of the world which hold true irrespective of the beliefs and investigative techniques of human beings.
- *Objectivity*: there are statements (or propositions) which are, in principle, true or false – that is, objectively true or false, and this especially applies to the statements of science and history.
- *Knowledge and Truth*: knowledge is a matter of accurate representation, and truth consists in correspondence to reality or the way things really are; in line with this view it is possible to find a perspective that finally gets things right and is universally binding for all rational people.
- *Rationality and Identity*: human reason may aspire to neutrality and sovereignty (over all domains of life); underlying this view is the idea of an autonomous, cohesive, rational self possessed of a timeless, disembodied essence and considered the ground of meaning, knowledge, and value (Descartes’ *cogito* is the typical example offered in this context).
- *‘Onto-Theology’* (Heidegger): a metaphysical tradition that has marked Western philosophy (particularly due to Aristotle and Hegel), which strives to render the whole realm of beings intelligible to human understanding, and does so by appeal to the supreme being, God.
- *‘Metanarratives’* (Lyotard): all-inclusive, overarching explanations or worldviews (e.g., Hegelian dialectics, Marxism, capitalism) which claim to be able to legitimate their creeds or theories by an appeal to universal (neutral, autonomous, objective) reason. Lyotard advocated incredulity and suspicion towards such ‘theories of everything’, as they mask their own status as ‘myth’ (not ‘myth’ in the sense of factual untruth, but in the sense of a narrative, non-scientific form of discourse). But metanarratives are also to be rejected because of their ‘totalizing’ tendencies, in the sense that they suppress difference and marginalize or even falsify opposing points of view, and thus pave the way towards silencing and oppressing whatever is ‘other’ (e.g., minority ethnic groups). Totality, in this sense, is but a small step from totalitarianism. Related to this is the tendency of overarching metaphysical systems to rationalise evil or suffering as necessary for some greater good, as in Christian (as well as secular, e.g., Marxist) theodicies – this providing further ethical motivation for resisting metanarratives.

- *'The Metaphysics of Presence'* (Derrida): the thesis that there are facts, meanings, propositions, and objects which can be clearly, distinctly, and incorrigibly perceived (they are immediately 'present' to us), without reference to the conditions (social, historical, etc.) which gave rise to them.
- *Progress*: the Enlightenment belief in human progress and emancipation, and teleological schemes, such as those of Hegel and Marx, which hold that history is moving towards some predetermined higher end.
- *Scientism*: the view that science provides the model for all legitimate forms of reasoning; or the belief that the assumptions, methods of research, etc., of the physical and biological sciences are equally appropriate and essential to all other disciplines, including the humanities and the social sciences.

This list may give the impression that postmodern philosophy is entirely reactionary, sceptical, and pessimistic. However, there is a strongly affirmative dimension to postmodern philosophy (despite the caricature that postmodern theorists refuse to take a stand or make a commitment on any substantive matter), and some of its more characteristic tenets and ideas may be summarized as follows:⁴

- *Anti-foundationalism*: our beliefs and practices lack any absolute or transcendent grounds.
- *Anti-realism*: there is no objective, mind-independent reality, and what passes as 'reality' is nothing but a social or conceptual construct. Jean Baudrillard, for example, speaks of 'hyperreality' as having displaced or replaced (and not simply distorted or heightened) 'reality' by means of simulacra – i.e., technologically produced signs or images of the real, which take the place of reality in such a way that it is no longer possible to make any distinction between copy and original (or illusion and reality).⁵
- *The 'Fictional' Nature of Truth*: if there is no objective reality, there can be no (objective) truth corresponding to that reality. Truth is rather to be understood, in the words of Nietzsche (1954: 46–47), as 'a mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms ... truths are illusions about which one has forgotten that this is what they are'. Or, as postmoderns like to say, the truth is that there is no (capitalised, absolute) Truth.
- *Language as Non-Representational*: language has a self-referential character, so that rather than representing or 'mirroring nature' (Rorty's characterisation of the Enlightenment view), language only refers back to itself, or to the community or tradition within which it is embedded. The meaning of a word, for example, is not some object in the world or an idea in one's mind, but is something that emerges as a result of the word's relations (similarities and differences) with other words – and since there is an unending chain of such relations, meaning is forever deferred, never fully present to the speaker (this, in short, is Derrida's notion of *différance*, a play of difference and deferral that is at work in all speech and writing).
- *Perspectivism*: there are no facts, only interpretations; there is no God's-eye point of view where things can be seen *sub specie aeternitatis*, but only different perspectives (or 'little narratives', opposed to grand or meta-narratives) thoroughly conditioned by, e.g., gender, language, time and culture; truth also is perspectival rather than a matter of correspondence to an independently existing reality.
- *Pluralism*: if truth is perspectival, then it is multiple and plural, and so there is a radical and irreducible pluralism at the heart of things (an idea sometimes compared with Kuhn's notion of incommensurable 'paradigms' in science, or the Wittgensteinian notion of 'language games').
- *Difference*: the category of 'difference' has philosophical primacy over the category of 'identity'. In the work of Deleuze, this means that the logic of identity (evident in the Hegelian

dialectic where two terms in an opposition – e.g., being/nonbeing, speech/writing – are synthesized to produce a new, higher unity) is replaced with a logic of difference, where apparently fixed distinctions are eroded, and diversity and heterogeneity are celebrated. In a similar vein, Lyotard refuses the grand narrative for the sake of a multitude of local narratives, while ethical priority is accorded to alterity in Levinas' account of ethics as that which is founded on the face-to-face relation with the Other.

- *The Plural Subject*: in line with the emphasis on difference, the notion of a universal and timeless subject that has a fixed identity or essence is replaced with the idea of historically embedded, malleable, and fragmented subjectivities (particularly evident in the anti-humanism of Foucault).
- *Deconstruction*: a way of reading or interpreting a text which uncovers a plurality of meanings which may be in conflict with each other, thus challenging or even undermining the apparent (or authorially intended) meaning of the text or the history of its interpretation. This interpretive strategy often involves a process of: (i) locating clearly-marked hierarchical oppositions (e.g., speech and writing, philosophy and literature); (ii) inverting these binaries by showing that their order of priority is not as secure as the text assumes, so that the subordinate notion may in fact be the dominant one; and (iii) then displacing the binary by means of a third term or 'undecidable' (e.g., 'arche-writing', 'trace', '*khôra*'), which cannot be subsumed within the old hierarchy.
- *Hermeneutics of Suspicion* (inspired by the 'masters of suspicion' Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud): the aim is to uncover the deep-seated motives, and especially the hidden biases and ruses that underlie claims to 'knowledge' and 'truth'. Foucault, for example, develops a 'genealogical' method to uncover the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power.

Postmodern philosophy as outlined above is open to criticism on a number of fronts. There are obvious concerns, for example, with the claims made regarding the nature of truth and reality. Like all global forms of relativism, the view that there is no such thing as objective truth or that truth is merely perspectival seems quickly to lead either to self-contradiction (for is it not an objective truth that there is no objective truth?) or to an 'anything goes' permissiveness (for if perspectivism undermines distinctions such as 'belief/truth' and 'our understanding of reality/reality itself', then the very distinction between truth and falsity is undermined and hence the notion of truth is effectively jettisoned – in which case no view is preferable to any other). Difficulties regarding the concept of truth will resurface in the following section, where I look at how postmodernism has taken shape when it has been crossed with philosophy of religion and theology. But for now at least, I will rest content with the foregoing 'snapshot' of postmodern philosophy and will reserve criticism for later.

Postmodern philosophy of religion: John Caputo

Postmodern philosophy of religion has taken a variety of forms, and it might be useful here to follow the typology developed by Merold Westphal (1998) in characterizing the varieties of postmodern theology: negative theology, Nietzschean 'death of God' theology, and phenomenological approaches. As this already indicates, postmodernism need not be atheistic or inimical to religion: if modernism involved a process of secularization, postmodernity seems to be marked by a return to God or an awakening of a new experience of the divine – hence the adoption of such terms as the 'post-secular' and 'anatheism'. But as Richard Kearney (2010) explains in his use of the 'anatheism' label, this is not intended as 'a return to some prelapsarian state of pure belief before modernity dissolved eternal verities' (p. 7). We have now irretrievably lost the kind of

original naïveté enjoyed by our ancient and medieval forebears, where religious faith came easily and remained largely unchallenged. For since the Enlightenment we have built up an impressive tradition of scientific scholarship and critical inquiry (or a ‘hermeneutic of suspicion’, in Ricoeur’s words) that has dismantled and demythologized the premodern world. But, for Kearney at least, we cannot rest content with this negative or at least critical posture, but must seek to surpass it so as to attain a ‘second naïveté’ (or a ‘second faith’), where awe and wonder are restored but are purified from credulity and superstition. Kearney therefore explains that the ‘ana’ in ‘anatheism’ ‘signals a movement of return to what I call a primordial wager, to an inaugural instant of reckoning at the root of belief. It marks a reopening of that space where we are free to choose between faith or nonfaith. As such, anatheism is about the *option* of retrieved belief’ (2010: 7, emphasis in the original). Somewhat unexpectedly, then, postmodernism is not just another ‘new atheism’ and may be compatible with and even of service to theology.⁶

One of the wellsprings of postmodern philosophy of religion has been the negative or apophatic tradition in theology, a tradition of mystics such as Pseudo-Dionysius (fifth or sixth century) and Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1327), who insist on the radical transcendence, incomprehensibility, and ineffability of God: God is holy other, the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, and is therefore also wholly other, *tout autre*. Given the radical otherness of God, our customary ways of using language become inapplicable, or even idolatrous and blasphemous, when approaching the mystery of God. The inability of the finite human mind to grasp the infinite God makes necessary the ‘way of negation’ (*via negativa*, or *apophasis*), an approach to religious language which questions the adequacy of the predicates we ascribe to God in the affirmative or *kataphatic* mode, as when we say ‘God is good, wise, and powerful’. Ascending from the *kataphatic* to the *apophatic*, the names traditionally applied to God are negated: God is said to be not good, not wise, not powerful, etc. – in the sense that these names are inappropriate as descriptions of the divine, or at least do not apply to God in the same way they are applied to creatures. However, for the mystics standing within this tradition, the goal of the *via negativa* was not merely the intellectual one of, e.g., discarding certain concepts, renouncing attachment to certain names of the divine, or overcoming certain forms of reasoning. Rather, it has a broader and more holistic scope (including the practices of meditation, prayer, silence, withdrawal and so on) so as to bring about the purification of mind and heart, and eventually ecstatic union with God.⁷ Although this practical or performative (even ascetical) dimension is sometimes neglected by postmodern philosophers and theologians, the apophatic tradition for many of them is an invaluable resource in overcoming ‘metaphysics’ in theology, a way of thinking about God that is inscribed or restricted by the categories of philosophy (such as ‘presence’, ‘cause’, ‘being’, etc.).⁸

A second important influence on postmodern philosophy of religion has been the ‘death of God’ movement that arose in American theology in the 1960s. Taking their lead from Nietzsche’s famous parable of the madman (in *Gay Science* §125), theologians such as Gabriel Vahanian, Paul van Buren, William Hamilton, and Thomas J.J. Altizer advocated a radically new, ‘post-Christian’ theology that sought to overturn or secularize traditional Christian doctrine (see Altizer and Hamilton 1966, and Altizer 1967). Altizer, for example, put forward a ‘Gospel of Christian atheism’, seeking to render the ‘good news’ of Christianity compatible with contemporary secularism and atheism (Altizer 1966). He attempted to do this by interpreting Christ’s death on the cross as the death of God himself, thus making atheism the logical conclusion of Christianity. As Altizer put it, ‘God has died in our time, in our history, in our existence’ (in Altizer and Hamilton 1966: 95). However, the death of God, on this view, signals not merely a cultural shift towards unbelief but, more radically, an ontological event involving the kenotic sacrifice of the transcendent God to the point of complete immanence and non-existence.

In a similar spirit, Mark C. Taylor blends this Nietzschean motif with deconstruction, which he introduces in his landmark *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* as ‘the “hermeneutic” of the death of God’ (1984: 6). In Taylor’s deconstructive a/theology, the death of God gives birth to the divine milieu of writing or the incarnate word (a radical christology), the self as the *imago dei* is dispersed in traces or markings, history as a process providentially directed by God comes to an end and gives way to direction-less erring and vagrant wandering, and the book as a self-contained, authoritative system is replaced by ‘texts’ that are open, broken, and errant. Negatively speaking, then, the death of God is a moment of nihilism, the moment wherein modern Western culture experiences a loss of belief in God but also a loss of belief in any absolutes, centres, or foundations, so that all our values are devalued and we lose our moorings; we don’t know any more who we are or where we are going. But on the positive side, the death of God creates unforeseen opportunities and openings – to revalue all our values, and especially to destabilize the traditional polarity between belief and unbelief so as to allow for previously neglected dimensions of the divine to appear within the space of undecidability signified by the slash in ‘a/theology’, and in this way to finally overcome the nihilism that the death of God inevitably brings.

A third major influence on postmodern philosophy of religion has been phenomenology, and particularly the so-called ‘theological turn’ said to have been inaugurated by Emmanuel Levinas and Michel Henry and then developed further in the writings of a more recent group of French philosophers, including Jean-Luc Marion, Jean-Yves Lacoste, and Jean-Louis Chrétien.⁹ These ‘New Phenomenologists’, like those of old, follow the rallying cry of the ‘Master’, Edmund Husserl: ‘Back to the things themselves!’, which means they take as their overriding goal the description of phenomena as they present themselves to us. But at the same time the project of Husserl is modified and radicalized in significant ways. Heidegger already did this in giving phenomenology a hermeneutical twist so that it is not so much a rigorous presuppositionless science, but interpretative and perspectival (a matter of seeing-as rather than simple or pure seeing). But the recent crop of phenomenologists have gone further, arguing that Husserl and Heidegger had not sufficiently explored the possibilities of phenomenology and remained embroiled in forms of metaphysical thinking. But in seeking to develop a new phenomenology that breaks free from the restrictions of metaphysics, the work of these philosophers has taken a distinct theological character – and this despite their efforts (or pretensions) at strictly demarcating philosophy from theology.

A good example of this is Marion’s phenomenology of givenness (or donation), which seeks to broaden the phenomenological method so that no phenomena whatever are excluded as *a priori* impossible or illegitimate.¹⁰ Marion detects such prejudiced or exclusionary tendencies in both Husserl and Heidegger. For example, Husserl’s breakthrough ‘first (or transcendental) reduction’ takes for granted that consciousness or the intentional and constituting I is the only horizon within which phenomena may appear, while in the ‘second (or existential) reduction’ of Heidegger the horizon is formed by time and being. But, for Marion, these are artificial limitations, for they exclude (in the case of Husserl) any phenomena that cannot be constituted by consciousness as objects, or (in the case of Heidegger) any phenomena that do not have to be (or be in time). Marion sees this in fact as a betrayal of phenomenology, since the imposition of consciousness or being as a limit (or horizon) prevents us from truly returning to the things themselves. ‘It is forbidden to forbid!’ Marion (1997: 289) retorts, in which case no restrictions or conditions can be imposed on what can be given or appear. Marion therefore proposes a ‘third reduction’, where the sole horizon this time is that of *givenness*: ‘So much reduction, so much givenness’. Phenomena are given according to no horizon other than an absolutely unconditioned call, the call or the given as such. This principle of givenness, of the originary

and unadulterated givenness of a phenomenon, is now lauded as the real breakthrough of phenomenology.

Having broken phenomenology wide open in this way, Marion contends that what has often been excluded for failing to comply with criteria of phenomenality laid down in advance – including religious phenomena, and above all God – may be allowed to appear, to show up in phenomenology. It is in this spirit that Marion puts forward his concept of the ‘saturated phenomenon’: a phenomenon that is saturated with intuition and hence exceeds the Kantian categories that are thought to constrain how we can regard phenomena and what we can experience (i.e., the categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality). The intuitive content of such phenomena, according to Marion, cannot be contained or objectified in any concepts or discourse, but demands an ‘endless hermeneutics’ that respects their multiple and indescribable excess. Although Marion allows for non-religious instances of saturated phenomena (including historical events, works of art, ‘the flesh’, i.e., that which establishes my ipseity or uniqueness, and the face of the other), he also wishes to make room for distinctly religious examples – above all, Christ as the revelation of God, which is, for Marion, a fourfold saturation, saturation to the second degree, exceeding all four Kantian categories at once.¹¹ Taking the theological theme further, and extending his criticism of Heidegger’s reduction to being, Marion also wants to think God ‘without being’ – in other words, to think God not as one more object or being amongst others, or even as being-itself, all of which reduce God to creaturely proportions, to the finite realm of being and beings. Instead, Marion prefers to speak of God as ‘beyond being’ and ultimately as the ‘pure gift of love’, as something that overturns our moral and metaphysical categories. In thinking of God in this way, Marion seeks to challenge the very foundations of classical phenomenology.

The work (particularly the more recent work) of John Caputo combines elements from each of these three varieties of postmodern philosophy of religion, into a distinct and powerful brand of postmodernism which will form the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

John D. Caputo (b.1941) is widely recognized as one of the most prominent contemporary philosophers of religion, particularly for his rigorous development and defence of a ‘postmodern faith’. After graduating from Bryn Mawr College in 1968 with a PhD on Heidegger’s *Der Satz vom Grund*, Caputo took up a position in the Philosophy Department at Villanova University, spending 36 years there before moving in 2004 to Syracuse University and retiring in 2011. His large body of publications, his passionate and eloquent teaching and writing style, together with the series of biennial conferences he led at Villanova and Syracuse played a pivotal role in relating postmodern thought to religious faith. But his journey to postmodernism was by no means an easy or direct one. Initially trained in Catholic theology – especially Aquinas and the French neo-Thomism of Maritain, Gilson and Rousselot – Caputo later turned to Heidegger’s philosophy and its links with the medieval mysticism and metaphysics of Aquinas and Eckhart (Caputo 1978, 1982). With the publication of Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics* in 1987, a decisive hermeneutic turn in his thought begins to take place, one that takes seriously the contextual and contingent nature of our beliefs and practices. But a turn against Heidegger was also taking place. Caputo (1978) had already argued that Heidegger’s ontology has little connection with morality and promotes an anti-democratic, anti-liberal politics. In the late 1980s–early 1990s, the critique of Heidegger became more devastating and definitive, partly due to the unsettling disclosures about Heidegger’s political activity in the 1930s, but also partly under the influence of Levinas and Derrida (Caputo 1993a). By the time his book on *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* was published in 1997, Caputo had well and truly departed from premodern Paris (Aquinas), was no longer wandering in the Schwarzwaldian woods with Heidegger, and had finally relocated to postmodern Paris (Derrida, Levinas), in the process establishing his own distinctive voice and version of postmodern philosophy and theology.¹²

However, my aim in what follows is not to chart Caputo's intellectual adventure, but to examine some central ideas in his later work that cross theology with Derridean deconstruction, radical hermeneutics, and other postmodern currents. In the process, I wish to scrutinize one of the more vulnerable aspects not only of Caputo's philosophy, but of postmodern philosophy more generally – and this will concern the capacity of postmodern thought to encompass and accommodate what variously comes under the labels of the concrete, the particular, and the determinate.

A word about Derrida's 'religion' may be helpful at this point, as this has had a tremendous influence on Caputo's own philosophy of religion.¹³ Derrida did not have much to say about theology in his early writings, such as *Of Grammatology* (1967) and *Writing and Difference* (1967), but what he did say tended to be dismissive of traditional (Judeo-Christian) theology, which he regarded as committed to the 'metaphysics of presence' and to God as a 'transcendental signified'. Even negative theology, according to the early Derrida, denies being to God only to make way for the affirmation of God as a hyper-essential being and hence as a metaphysical entity. From the early 1990s, however, Derrida made what has been called an 'ethico-religious turn', moving away from a concern with the problematic status of metaphysics to a new interest and appreciation for ethics and even religion (this resulting in part from his reading of Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Levinas, though there always remained a curious lack of any sustained engagement with more traditional theologians such as Aquinas). However this was not a turn to religion in any standard sense, but to (what he called) 'religion without religion', a phrasing borrowed from Blanchot and Levinas, although the idea goes back to Augustine and Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793), where Kant sought to free religion from the historical and particular (e.g., the creeds of the church) and to ground it in the abstract and universal (specifically, the moral law). Derrida repeated Kant's gesture but radicalized it, departing from dogmatic (revealed) faith so as to make room not merely for reflective (rational, philosophical) faith, as in Kant, but for a broader notion of faith as the quasi-transcendental condition of any meaningful interaction and communication. In thus broadening, or desertifying and decontaminating, the historical and determinate religions ('messianisms'), Derrida (2002: 56) sought to delineate an abstract and universal structure he called the 'messianic', which he defined as 'the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prophetic prefiguration'. Like Kant's moral religion, Derrida's religion is configured as a matter of ethics and justice, of responsibility to the other (conceived as holy because absolutely singular: *tout autre est tout autre*) – but it is a religion 'without religion', without priests and dogmas. Although Derrida consistently ruled out any appeal to revelation or determinate faith as violent and liable to fanaticism, his work increasingly engaged with theological themes and took on religious and even mystical overtones. For example, in his haunting and enigmatic 'Circumfession' (1993), a kind of Jewish *Confessions* written in the form of a journal he kept while his beloved mother lay dying in Nice, Derrida intriguingly talks about 'my religion about which nobody understands anything,' with the result that he has been 'read less and less well over almost twenty years' (p. 154), and yet he goes on to write that 'I quite rightly pass for an atheist' (p. 155). When questioned about this turn of phrase in an interview conducted in 2000 with Mark Dooley, who asked 'Why do you say in *Circumfession*, that you "rightly pass for an atheist", instead of simply stating that you are an atheist?', Derrida replied:

I am being ironic. Firstly, I prefer to refer to what *they* say ... So I feel free because *I* am not saying this ... It is, however, not that simple. For I am more than one: I am the atheist they think I am, which is why I say that I 'rightly' pass for an atheist, but I

would also approve of those people who say exactly the opposite. Who is right? I don't know. I don't know whether I am or not.

(in Dooley 2003: 32, *emphases in the original*)

Caputo (2003c: 43), in commenting on this response, explains that Derrida does qualify as an atheist – 'by the standards, say, of the local pastor, of the Pope or Jerry Falwell'. But given Derrida's rejection of the unity of the self ('I am more than one'), Derrida does not believe that we can ever achieve the kind of self-identity and self-transparency required by a religious credo, where we proclaim 'I believe ...'. Given, further, his commitment to deconstruction and hence to the undecidability of the theist/atheist opposition, Derrida refuses to categorise himself as an atheist (or a theist). It is not, therefore, a matter of being confused about what one believes, but of refusing the very parameters within which the question (Are you an atheist?) is set. Undecidability in this sense also runs deeply through Caputo's work, as we will see.

Caputo borrows the notion of 'religion without religion' from Derrida, but extends and deepens it, with the aim of offering a religious faith that is credible in postmodern times. A systematic and detailed account of how Caputo achieves this across his voluminous writings is not possible here. But a beginning can at least be made by looking at the particularly clear exposition he provides of his general outlook in *On Religion* (2001). Bearing in mind that this short book was published as part of a series aimed at a broad readership, rather than scholars and specialists (hence its highly readable, polemical, and indeed humorous style and its many references to popular culture), the book nevertheless provides a good entry-point into Caputo's attempt to delineate the meaning of God-talk in a high-tech, post-secular world, a world that has left behind not only the original naïveté enjoyed by our ancient and medieval forebears, but also the reductionism of modernist critiques of religion.

Much of the philosophically pertinent material for my purposes lies in the concluding chapter of the book (Ch. 5: 'On Religion – Without Religion'), and so it is this that I will focus on. Caputo there sharply distinguishes 'religious truth' from 'true religion' (2001: 109–10). The notion of 'religious truth', he notes, supports the notion of religious pluralism, the idea that the religions of the world represent different but equally valid ways to come to love and know God, so that none can claim exclusive possession of 'the truth'. By contrast, the notion of 'true religion', in the sense of 'the one true religion', assumes that there is one and only one religion which possesses the full truth. This kind of exclusivism, according to Caputo, can only breed intolerance and violence (2001: 114; cf. 1997: 47–48, 2006a: 10–11). Elsewhere Caputo has stated that even if there were a true religion (or what he calls a 'Secret Truth'), it is better that this truth remain a secret and not be given, for if it were given there would ensue a terrible fight over who would get to have it, interpret it, speak in its name, etc. (2003b: 16). This has led Caputo in more recent work to develop a 'weak theology' which dispenses with powerful confessional and doctrinal identities in favour of those that are minimal, indeterminate, and pluralistic (Caputo 2006a).

But there is a further, and perhaps more philosophically important, reason as to why Caputo rejects the idea of 'true religion'. In Caputo's view, religion does not involve proposing quasi-scientific hypotheses or explanations in the hope of getting the 'facts of the matter' right. Rather, religious discourse is best seen as a 'theopoetics' or a 'poetics of the impossible', where truth is not correspondence with the ways things really are, but is something that expresses the *virtue* of being genuinely religious, truly loving God, loving God in spirit and in truth (2001: 110–13). Truth in religion, then, is not to be found in creedal pronouncements, but in 'serving the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in the worst streets of the most dangerous neighbourhoods' (2001: 114). Underlying this view of religion is a pragmatist or performative

(as opposed to a cognitivist or representational) conception of truth: *facere veritatem* (an expression used by Augustine and often cited by both Derrida and Caputo), truth as something that we make happen as in ‘doing the truth’ or ‘making the truth happen’. Truth, in this sense, belongs to the order of love and action, not knowledge and metaphysics – in which case whether a religion is true will depend on the fruitfulness or sanctity of the form of life to which it gives rise (or, to put it in Caputo’s Levinasian terms, the degree to which we are open to serving the needy and the stranger). But if this account of religious language is correct, then the very idea of there being a ‘one true religion’ commits a category-mistake: the notion of ‘the one true religion’ makes no more sense than ‘the one true language’ or ‘the one true poetry’ or ‘the one true culture’. Indeed, on Caputo’s view, there is no reason why the various world religions cannot *all* be true (2001: 110; cf. 2006a: 118).

Caputo proceeds (in Ch. 5 of *On Religion*) to consider a threat to religion that is even greater than the fact of religious plurality – this he calls the ‘tragic sense of life’. This is a nihilistic view of the world as cruel and uncaring, a play of blind forces without purpose and value, where everything will eventually be reduced to dust and ashes, including the comforting illusions of religion and morality (2001: 118–25; cf. 2003b: 8–11). Opposed to this despairing view stands the ‘religious sense of life’, which is expressed as the faith that there is something (love) or someone (God) that renders life meaningful and worthwhile. What Caputo wishes to stress in this context is the inescapable ‘undecidability’ between these competing worldviews. We can never be sure that we have worked things out, once and for all. Final knowledge finally eludes us. As Caputo puts it, ‘we must all “fess up” that we do not know who we are or what is going on, not “Really”, not in some “Deep Way”, although we all have our views’ (2001: 124). Therefore the religious believer, if they are honest with themselves, can never entirely eradicate the disturbing possibility that the tragic view is the right one – the tragic view is like a ghost or spectre: we cannot make it go away, it will always haunt us (and so Caputo speaks of ‘hauntology’). The answer to the central question (of which of these two visions is the correct one) is therefore undecidable: no-one really knows the answer. However undecidability does not lead to indecision or paralysis, but is rather the condition of possibility of a decision. For the opposite of undecidability is not decision or decisiveness, but ‘programmability’, making a decision mechanically by following an algorithm or decision-procedure. Undecidability therefore means that human judgment, decision-making and faith are required, since no decision is dictated or programmed beforehand.¹⁴

Caputo puts this notion of undecidability to work in the following part of the chapter where he outlines ‘the faith of a postmodern’ (2001: 125–32), a faith that has lost its faith in what is ‘really real’. In considering Augustine’s question, ‘What do I love when I love my God?’, Caputo identifies three different answers which could be given:

- *Pre-modern response*: when we love anything, it is *really* God whom we love.
- *Modern response*: ‘God’ is *really* just one of the many names we have for love.
- *Postmodern response*: what is *really real* is undecidable, thus making ‘God’ and ‘love’ endlessly substitutable and translatable.

The first two answers are forms of reductionism, attempting to unmask reality, to show what is really going on beneath the surface. And it is only in the last case, with the admission of undecidability, that the strategy of unmasking is renounced – but it is this very undecidability that makes faith (albeit of a postmodern sort) possible.

Caputo concludes *On Religion*, with characteristic rhetorical flourish, by identifying the ‘axioms of a religion without religion’ (2001: 132–41; cf. 1997: 331–32). These axioms are

presented in terms of the following threefold ascent, with each step taking one closer to postmodern faith:

Axiom 1: I do not know who I am or whether I believe in God.

A state of uncertainty where, like Augustine, I become a question unto myself and I can't decide whether to stake my lot with the believers or the unbelievers. For Caputo 'this is a start', but 'it is too cognitivist and not passionate enough ... Undecidability here runs too close to the edge of complacency and indecision' (2001: 132–33).

Axiom 2: I do not know whether what I believe in is God or not.

Now I do make a decision in the direction of belief, even though I do not know in what I believe. This is more engaged and committed, but it is still not passionate enough, for it is overly concerned with the epistemic issue of identifying *what* we believe in, rather than the practical problem of *how* to live.

Axiom 3: *What do I love when I love my God?* Or better: *How do I love when I love my God?*

Only now do I arrive at the postmodern recognition that God is not a 'what', something to be captured by a concept, but a 'how', a deed of love and justice, so that 'God is served in spirit and in truth, not in propositions' (2001: 135).

As an initial reaction to Caputo's account of religious language, it may be thought that this account massively misrepresents the nature and function of language about God – or at least it greatly distorts what the majority of ordinary believers understand themselves to be saying and confessing. It seems clear and obvious, for example, that when Christians confess the Creed ('I believe in one God, the Father Almighty ...') they are making truth-claims of the sort that are more than mere poetic or performative utterances. In this instance they are, at a bare minimum, asserting that there is a God – that there 'really' is a God, whose reality is objective and mind-independent (not a purely human construct). *Even if* there is a performative and practical dimension to such creedal confessions (as is the case when, for example, the Creed is proclaimed in the context of liturgical prayer and is therefore embedded in a network of spiritual disciplines), and *even if* such creedal utterances should not be reduced to a species of scientific theorizing, there remains an inescapable factual and perhaps even explanatory dimension in such language. Therefore it seems implausible to draw a radical disjunction, as Caputo wishes to do, between (to borrow his own labels) 'religious truth' and '(the one) true religion'.

This kind of criticism has often been leveled against Wittgensteinian or nonrealist accounts of religious belief, which resemble in many ways the account given by Caputo. A common riposte (by D.Z. Phillips and others) has been that philosophy of religion is not something that can (or should) be done by popular questionnaire or referendum. For the matter at issue has to do not with the 'surface grammar' of religious utterances (or what believers seem to be saying, at face-value), but with the 'deep grammar' of religious beliefs, or their underlying conceptual structures and how these are related to various activities (e.g., prayer, liturgy, etc.). Caputo would, I suspect, offer a similar reply but in language more indebted to Continental philosophy than Wittgensteinian ordinary language analysis. He would speak, for example, of seeking to understand the underlying limit experiences – or 'events' – that are harboured in the narratives and practices, in the texts and institutions of religion. To this end he develops a 'radical

hermeneutics', a hermeneutics radicalized by deconstruction so as to produce a structural 'blindness' or non-knowing, where privileged access to Meaning, Truth, or Being is forever foreclosed by the inescapable play of signs. In the very opening page of his book, *More Radical Hermeneutics*, Caputo (2000b: 1) describes this as the thesis that

we are not (as far as we know) born into this world hard-wired to Being Itself, or Truth Itself, or the Good Itself, that we are not vessels of a Divine or World-Historical super-force that has chosen us as its earthly instruments, and that, when we open our mouths, it is we who speak, not something Bigger and Better than we. We have not been given privileged access to The Secret, to some big capitalized know-it-all Secret, not as far as we know. (If we have, it has been kept secret from me.) The secret is, there is no Secret.¹⁵

This, of course, has much in common with the Nietzschean doctrine of perspectivism, mentioned earlier. Caputo applies this doctrine to all attempts to crack the Secret, whether they take the form of the creedal formulations of Christianity, or the 'unvarnished reductionism' of the Enlightenment, where religion is held up to be (for example) *nothing but* the expression of perverse psychological desires (Freud) or *nothing but* a way of keeping the ruling authorities in power (Marx). These, according to Caputo, are 'just so many contingent ways of construing the world under contingent circumstances that eventually outlive their usefulness when circumstances change' (2001: 59).¹⁶ It is Caputo's radical hermeneutics, then, that compels him to refuse religion *with* religion: any commitment to a determinate or concrete religion as 'the one true religion' is a violent and presumptuous gesture, one that claims to have privileged access to a God's-eye view of things when no such view is possible for mere mortals. Truth is rather to be seen as perspectival, and talk of 'The Truth' is best replaced by talking of competing truths and interpretations. Rejecting the notion of truth as correspondence with the way things really are then paves the way for (re)figuring the meaning of 'truth', especially in religion, in performative terms as doing justice and loving truly, as serving the neighbour and stranger.

A more challenging criticism of Caputo's 'religion without religion' is that it is not post-modern enough, that it is compromised by modernist assumptions and ways of thinking. This objection has been expressed in different ways. Kevin Hart (2010), for example, argues that the idea of 'religion without religion' follows Kant in reducing religion to morality, and presumes along with much Enlightenment thought that there is a genus 'religion' of which Christianity is an instance. On this view, Caputo 'follows the Enlightenment program of passing from the positive religions to a universal religiosity that has always remained pure because it has always abided in the realm of possibility' (Hart 2010: 95). Caputo has, in turn, responded to this line of criticism, and here I only wish to consider one of the points he makes by way of reply, as this is a line of argument that gets repeated in much of his work.¹⁷

Caputo states his main thesis in the following terms: 'only as hauntology is revelation possible' (2010: 113). He goes on to elucidate this as follows:

I do not think of this 'pure' faith or 'religion without religion' as a faith that somebody believes, or a religion that somebody can inhabit, or a position that somebody takes, or as a proposition that somebody can propose. I am not an advocate of religious abstractionism or an abstractionist religion. I take this pure *foi* as a ghost, a spectre, that haunts us in the sorts of concrete positions – philosophical, political, and religious – that we do take, displacing the place (*khôra*) in which they are situated. A religion without religion is not an abstract religion that anyone actually holds – you can't

report it on the next census or expect to get a tax break by making a charitable contribution to its cause – but a spectre that disturbs the hold our various faiths have on us. It is a spook that haunts the concrete religious faiths and keeps them up at night, with a sharpened sense of their contingency, with the result that we hold them in a heartfelt way while also conceding an ironic distance from them, because we know full well how easy it would have been to be holding something else in an equally heartfelt way.

(2010: 114)

On the next page, he continues in a similar but more humorous vein, this time responding to Hart's habit of speaking of 'the revelation' – i.e., a single, definitive revelation:

The Revelation, '*la' revelation*, ... commits us to thinking of something that happens to just those of us (and notice it is always *us*, not the other guy) who happen to have the luck (grace, gift) to be standing in the right place at the right time as the divine motorcade goes speeding by so that we could catch a glimpse of the god, while those poor chaps down the street missed it entirely. But if this grand idea is de-capitalized we can hold on to the idea that God is not partial, and that it is we who are the partial ones.

(2010: 115)

Clearly, Caputo is not simply repeating the Enlightenment program, but is seeking to radicalise it through his version of 'hauntological' hermeneutics. But there is a curious and faulty logic lying behind his defence of 'religion without religion', one that is often found in philosophical defences of religious pluralism. This comes out clearly in the previous two quotations, especially in the last one (due to its biting sarcasm), where Caputo is arguing for the highly conditioned and contingent nature of religious belief. John Hick, from the standpoint of the very different analytic tradition, has made a similar argument when defending his hypothesis of religious pluralism, which he formulates as the hypothesis that the great religious traditions of the world represent different human perceptions of, and responses to, the same infinite divine Reality. Hick defends this hypothesis by, in part, appealing to the following epistemological principle: *the genetic and environmental relativity of religious perception and commitment* (see Hick 1985: 73). According to this principle, what religious faith one subscribes to depends to a significant extent on the accidents of where and when one is born. As a result, one should adopt a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' – i.e., a suspicious, if not agnostic, attitude towards one's own religious tradition, as it might simply be the product of one's birth and upbringing.

But it is not difficult to see how this reasoning goes wrong. As Plantinga (1997) has pointed out in response to Hick, the mere fact that you would hold a different set of beliefs if you were born at a different time and place does not mean that the process by which your beliefs were produced is unreliable. One can therefore respond to Hick (and Caputo) in *tu quoque* fashion: if you, Hick, had been born, say, to Buddhist parents in Thailand in the twelfth century then you probably would not be a pluralist; so you should give up or take a suspicious attitude towards your own pluralist beliefs. Indeed, if, as a general principle, a person must give up or suspend judgement on any such beliefs, then they would have to give up most of their beliefs. But that is hardly a sound epistemological strategy.¹⁸

As indicated earlier, Caputo also rejects religious exclusivism on socio-political grounds, for he alleges that such exclusivism inevitably leads to Crusades and Inquisitions.¹⁹ This of course is a common criticism of exclusivism, and although historically there has been an unfortunate correlation between exclusivism and violence, it's not clear that there is a necessary connection

between the two. (This is particularly the case if religious exclusivism is understood simply as the claim that there is one religion, and only one religion, which is true; and not as the additional claim that only one religion is soteriologically effective.) Followers of the ‘determinable faiths’, who typically adopt an exclusivist stance towards other religions, are not always fanatics or fundamentalists – and this is quite often due to the resources within their own religious tradition which teach the value of humility and questioning, and of hospitality and openness towards the other.²⁰ It seems perfectly possible, then, for an exclusivist to adopt an ‘ethics of *Gelassenheit*’ (to use Caputo’s term: 1987: 264–67), a letting the other be, respecting their singularity and difference and their freedom of conscience and religious expression, and willing to engage in genuine dialogue with them.²¹

On this diagnosis, Caputo remains entangled in the Enlightenment prejudice of prioritising the ‘pure’ (or what he calls the dry, desert-like messianic) over the ‘impure’ (the living, concrete messianisms)²² – and what underlies this is the ‘scandal of particularity’, the scandal that truth may take (in religion and elsewhere) historical and determinate form. This is a peculiar situation for any postmodern philosopher to find themselves in, given that postmodernism lays great store by the concrete and the singular. But perhaps there is another and deeper source lying behind Caputo’s difficulties with determinate faith – and this relates to the fact that any commitment to a determinate faith does not cohere with the typically postmodern claim that ‘the truth is there is no Truth’. Given what Caputo calls ‘the cold, hermeneutic truth, the truth that there is no truth, no master name which holds things captive’ (1987: 192), then there cannot be any (ultimate, non-perspectival) Truth, in which case – *contra* exclusivism – there cannot be any religion which possesses the Truth.

Merold Westphal (2001: 75–88) has contested the way in which, in his view, secular postmodern thinkers tend to reach the conclusion that ‘the truth is that there is no Truth’ (that is, when they don’t simply assert it as a given!). According to Westphal, postmoderns are often guilty of a *non-sequitur* when making claims of this sort, for they move from ‘We have no absolute insight’ to ‘There is no absolute insight’, or from ‘Our perspective is not absolute’ to ‘There is no absolute perspective’. In other words, a metaphysical claim is illegitimately deduced from an epistemic claim. For Westphal, all we can claim is that we do not have (pure, unmediated) access to Truth: ‘The truth is that there is Truth, but in our finitude and fallenness we do not have access to it’ (2001: 87). The correct conclusion to draw is that we are not God, not there is no God.²³

Admittedly, it’s not difficult to impugn some postmodern philosophers with the fallacy identified by Westphal. Even Caputo often slides from the epistemic claim that we have no privileged access to the way things really are, to the far stronger metaphysical (anti-realist) claim that there is no way things really are.²⁴ The former, epistemic claim does not necessarily lead to relativism (with respect to truth), for as Westphal points out there may well be an absolute Truth even if our knowledge of it can never be absolute. It is only the latter, metaphysical claim which leads to relativism. For if there is no way things really are, then there cannot be any statements which correspond to the way things really are – which is to say there cannot be any absolute truth, but only relative truths (true statements whose truth is relative to a conceptual scheme, perspective, language game, or something of that ilk).

But before we pounce on Caputo for promulgating what Pope Benedict XVI called the ‘dictatorship of relativism’, it must be borne in mind that postmodern philosophies like Derrida’s and Caputo’s are far more subtle and nuanced than these quick and all-too-common denunciations suppose. Caputo, in particular, wishes to circumvent the entire realism/anti-realism divide by means of a ‘realism without realism’, following the same strange logic of ‘without’ as in his ‘religion without religion’. He does, therefore, wish to reject realism in some sense – for

example, he states that he would reject realism 'if realism means essentialism, the claim that our universals and eidetic types correspond to real ontological orders' (2000a: §27), or 'if realism means the affirmation of the transcendental signified, of some *Ding an sich* which is left standing when the play of signifiers collapses in a heap' (2000a: §28). But he doesn't think that what follows from this is some pernicious form of relativism or linguistic idealism, where we are locked within the prison-house of language or subjectivity, as he points out in defence of Derrida:

Derrida's much abused observation, *il n'y a pas de hors-texte* does not mean there is no reference, but that there is no reference without difference, without *différance*, without the operations of textuality, differential spacing, and contextuality. 'When I say there is nothing outside the text,' he tells the Dubliners, 'I mean there is nothing outside the context' (QE, 79). That means not that there is no reference but that reference is not what it is cracked out to be, not what it passes itself off for, not the serene operation of an autonomous subject-archer picking out objects with unfailing accuracy by means of signs wholly submissive to its intentional aims.

(2000a: §28)²⁵

The rejection of classical forms of realism, according to Caputo, does not open the door to some nihilistic denial of truth and reality, but makes it possible for us to see that these notions are much more complex and elusive than we may have presumed. So, in place of classical realism, Caputo (2000a) advocates the affirmation of what he calls 'hyper-realism', where hyper-reality is described in terms of: (i) *singularity*, the hyper-real as that which is singular and unrepeatable, and so swings free of our proper names; (ii) *inaccessibility*, the hyper-real as other to the degree that it cannot be subsumed within our horizons; (iii) *secrecy*, the hyper-real as that which cannot be accessed, thus consigning us to endless interpretation; and (iv) *messianicity*, the hyper-real as what is to come (not present), whose coming we cannot imagine or foresee.

In his more recent work, *The Weakness of God* (2006a), Caputo applies hyper-realism to theology to produce a theology of the event, according to which 'the name of God is an event, or rather that it harbors an event, and that theology is the hermeneutics of that event' (p. 2). Caputo explains that this is not a form of realism: 'I am methodologically abstaining from treating God or God's kingdom as a *res* or a *realissimum* inasmuch as I am refraining from making any entitative or ontological claims about God-the-being or the Being of God' (p. 123; cf. p. 10). But neither is his theology a form of anti-realism, where God is reduced to (say) a metaphor, or a projection of human wishes, or a fiction (p. 123). The name of God, for Caputo, does not pick out an entity (realism), or an illusion (anti-realism), but an 'event' that takes place in 'hyper-reality'. By this 'hyper-realism', Caputo explains,

I mean the excess of the promise, of the call, of the endless provocation of an event that calls us beyond ourselves, down unplotted paths and into unexplored lands, calling us to go where we cannot go, extending us beyond our reach. Hyper-reality reaches beyond the real to the not-yet-real, what eye has not yet seen nor ear yet heard, in the open-endedness of an uncontainable, unconstrictable, undeconstructible event.

(2006a: 11–12)

Clearly, this cannot be read in purely epistemic terms, where the hyper-real is simply that which is beyond our epistemic and conceptual grasp. For the negative theologian would want to say the

same about God, and Caputo fervently wishes to distance his hyper-realism from the hyper-ousiology of the mystic (2006a: 302, n16). So, the hyper-real occupies a different plane from the real: it is otherwise than being, not assimilable to garden-variety existence, and may even be called a 'wonderland' (2006a: 109), though it is not for all that 'unreal' (a mere fantasy).

But what sense can be made of this penumbral reality that is neither real nor unreal in any standard sense? Caputo seeks to clarify his notion of hyper-reality by way of the distinction between a 'logic of the possible' and a 'poetics of the impossible'. The former is the kind of formal language typically employed by scientists and analytic philosophers – a discourse based upon logical principles delineating what is possible, probable or necessary at the level of (real or possible) entities or beings. A 'poetics of the impossible', by contrast, is not governed by logical laws and rational argumentation (and hence 'impossible' does not in this context refer to a logical contradiction). Rather, this is a discourse brimming with a variety of literary techniques and idioms (e.g., parables, paradoxes) with the aim not of describing occurrences in the world of physics and metaphysics, but of summoning the irruption of events in the 'kingdom of God'. Such a poetics, then, is 'a non-literalizing description of the event that tries to depict its dynamics, to trace its style, and to cope with its fortuitous forces by means of felicitous tropes' (2006a: 4).²⁶

A poetics lies outside the order of being or metaphysics, and so it makes no (propositional, cognitive) truth-claims, whether of a relative or an absolute sort. The charge of relativism is thereby blunted. This, however, gives rise to other problems, including that of distortion mentioned earlier: How many believers (other than erudite postmoderns) would recognise themselves, and the beliefs and practices they cherish, in the symbolic space that is created by the 'poetics of the impossible'? Perhaps not many. But this might leave Caputo unmoved, given that he does not see himself as answerable to any confessional community (and hence to their criteria as to what counts as a valid interpretation of their beliefs and practices), but rather sees himself as reforming and reframing our approach to the religious, rescuing it from the idols of metaphysics so as to make possible a passion for the impossible.²⁷ But now the problem becomes one of pragmatics and politics. To see religious discourse as a poetics that makes no truth-claims (in the standard sense) is to divest religion of its potential to provide genuine meaning and to effect radical change. For if religious language swings free of how things really stand (with us, with the world), then it has no resources to transform the way things are. Those who wish to understand the world, as it really is, so as to enrich their lives and to create a better and more just life for others will be therefore left without answers – since religion (without religion) is simply not in the game of asking the relevant questions. Postmodernism was often charged in its heyday as thoroughly apolitical, or as even militating against political reform. It is this ironic collusion of conservatism and radicalism that is also present in Caputo's postmodern philosophy of religion.²⁸

Notes

- 1 In 1999, Caputo could joke about the word 'postmodernism': 'I use it only when I need to draw a crowd' (quoted in Carlson 2000: 391), but I doubt the word would have the same pulling power today. For an overview of the early uses of the term 'postmodernism', see Drolet (2004: 4–9), where the first reference to postmodernism is said to be found in the 1926 work, *Postmodernism and Other Essays*, by Catholic theologian Bernard Iddings Bell. However, Sim (2005: viii) traces the word back to the 1870s, when the English painter John Watkins Chapman used it in reference to art that went beyond impressionism.
- 2 On the influence of postmodernism on a range of disciplines and cultural areas, see Connor (1997, 2004) and Sim (2005). In-depth accounts of postmodernism now of course abound – some of the

- better of these include Harvey (1990), Bertens (1995), Best and Kellner (1997), and Malpas (2005). For shorter introductions, see Butler (2002) and Hart (2004).
- 3 A distinction is often drawn between postmodernism and postmodernity (and also between modernism and modernity), with the former indicating a theoretical project (or even an attitude or style) one is adumbrating or recommending, and the latter delineating a cultural milieu or historical epoch. In this section I go back and forth between these two senses, outlining some of the cultural manifestations of modernism and postmodernism, and also saying something about their theoretical underpinnings (while going into greater detail on the theoretical dimension in the following section).
 - 4 I do not wish to give the impression that all of the views delineated below would be accepted by all (or a majority of) postmodern philosophers. To be sure, some of the ideas listed below would be rejected by some postmodern thinkers, or accepted in only modified or attenuated form (as, indeed, the following footnote suggests).
 - 5 Baudrillard, for example, provocatively entitled his 1991 book *La Guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (The Gulf War Did Not Take Place), claiming that the Gulf War was more of a media spectacle than a real war. However, there are other, and perhaps more plausible, ways of construing Baudrillard's view – e.g., as an epistemological rather than a metaphysical claim: though there is an objective reality, we now live in an era where we no longer have any means of distinguishing this reality from its simulated counterpart. Derrida's infamous statement, 'There is nothing outside of the text' (1967/1974: 158), is also often discussed in this context. It has been argued, however, that Derrida was not thereby advocating a form of anti-realism or linguistic idealism, according to which texts have no referents, or there are only words, not things. Rather, Derrida's point was to emphasise the mediating role of language: our access to the world is always filtered by language or 'textuality', the system of signs and interpretations we rely upon to navigate ourselves in the world. On this view, Derrida's statement is a form of perspectivism: there are no facts, only interpretations (Hart 2000: 25–26; Smith 2006: chapter 2).
 - 6 Ursula King (1998: 7) has similarly noted that 'postmodernism can ... be seen positively as a challenging task, an opportunity, even a gift for religion in the modern world'. Caputo (2007: 266) likewise writes that 'postmodernism turns out to be not a particularly friendly environment for atheism ... if atheism is a metaphysical or an otherwise fixed and decisive denial of God'.
 - 7 This is why in the traditional theology of the divine names, the *via negativa* is followed by the *via eminentia*, where predication (whether in the form of affirmation or negation) gives way to praise and prayer. Marion has done much to emphasize this 'third way', beyond *kataphasis* and *apophasis* – see, e.g., Marion (2002a: chapter 6). See also Ellsworth (2002) for an excellent account of the connections between the apophatic tradition and spiritual practices.
 - 8 This is especially the case in Hart (2000: 104), which counters the assumption that deconstruction is necessarily atheistic by presenting negative or mystical theology as a form of deconstruction: 'negative theology performs the deconstruction of positive theology. In doing so, negative theology reveals a non-metaphysical theology at work within positive theology.'
 - 9 The term 'theological turn' was originally applied in a derisive fashion to these phenomenologists by Dominique Janicaud (2000). On the theological turn, see also Janicaud (1998/2005), and Benson and Wirzba (2010).
 - 10 For excellent introductions to Marion's phenomenology, see Homer (2005) and Gschwandtner (2007).
 - 11 On Marion's notion of the 'saturated phenomenon', see Marion (2000, 2002a).
 - 12 See Caputo (1999, 2003a) for his intellectual autobiographies. For a good overview and analysis of Caputo's thought, and especially his ethics, politics, and critique and appropriation of Heidegger, see Zimmerman (1998).
 - 13 For more detailed discussions of Derrida's thought on religion, see Hart and Sherwood (2005), Hart (2009), and Shakespeare (2009). For a collection of some of Derrida's writings on religion, see Derrida (2002).
 - 14 Caputo himself decides in favour of the religious vision, on the grounds that the tragic view cannot make room for moral evaluation, and hence resistance and protest against injustice (2001: 121–23). But he has often been read as surreptitiously deciding in favour of the tragic vision (see, e.g., Kearney 2003).
 - 15 See also Caputo's discussion of 'the Secret' on pp. 17–24 in *On Religion*.
 - 16 Caputo's description of the Enlightenment critique of religion as 'unvarnished reductionism' occurs on p. 63 of *On Religion*. Cf. Caputo (2006b: 49).
 - 17 In addition to the reply I will proceed to outline, Caputo also comments that he, like Derrida, does not oppose the Enlightenment, but favours a 'new Enlightenment', the continuation and improvement of the Enlightenment ideals (Caputo 2010: 109; cf. Putt 2002: 166). He also points out that, far from

- wishing to reduce religion to morals, in the manner of Kant, he has declared himself ‘against ethics’ (as the title of his 1993 book indicates) (2010: 116). (However, Caputo does wish to retain an ethics of some sort – viz., one of obligation, justice and responsibility – even if it is an ethics without metaphysical grounding.) Finally, Caputo notes that he rejects the Kantian notion of a purely formal *a priori* of revealability, to which the historical revelations stand as concrete instantiations, but rather sees *foi* (arche-faith, what corresponds to Derrida’s messianic) as a Heideggerian ‘formal indicator’ that is not free from historical conditioning (2010: 112–13; cf. 1997: 142).
- 18 See also Plantinga (2000: 437–57) for Plantinga’s response to criticisms of religious exclusivism. There is a further problem relating to the coherence or internal consistency of Caputo’s account. Caputo, as we saw, compares the tragic sense of life with the religious view of life, and points out that we cannot settle the question of which of these two visions represents the ‘real truth’. But if, as Caputo himself proposes, truth in religion amounts to doing something, rather than (say) correspondence with reality, then how could a conflict between the religious vision and the tragic vision even arise? The religious vision, on Caputo’s view, is not in the fact-stating business, and so how can it be contradicted or refuted by anything in the tragic vision? This perhaps explains why, in Caputo (1987: 285, 287), the two visions are presented as being incommensurable.
 - 19 Caputo is here following Derrida’s rejection of determinate religion as inherently violent (see Smith 1998: 207–10).
 - 20 Ironically, Caputo (2003b) himself testifies to this in his intellectual autobiography when he describes how his own Catholic religious tradition has been a major driving force behind his philosophical work.
 - 21 For a criticism of Caputo (and Derrida) along similar lines, see Smith (1998) and Kuipers (2002). Smith puts the matter particularly well when he enjoins us to ‘understand religion, in a fundamentally deconstructive gesture, as pharmacological, site of both poison and cure’ (p. 211). Interestingly, Caputo (2002: 128) has conceded that ‘the main rhetorical failure’ of *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* is this tendency to downplay the positive and peaceful potentialities of the determinable faiths. Another difficulty with any blanket rejection of exclusivism is that some form of exclusivism seems unavoidable. For as soon as one commits oneself to a particular position (whether it be exclusivism or even pluralism), one thereby makes an exclusionary (if not violent) gesture by ruling out all views that are incompatible with this position as false or irrational.
 - 22 The messianic for Caputo is a quasi-transcendental (not a pure transcendental), a ‘formal indicator’ of the concrete messianisms, in which case the messianic too is to some extent determinate and conditioned. Despite this, the messianic remains privileged over against the messianisms due to the former’s comparative indeterminateness or ‘purity’.
 - 23 Caputo (2005) has responded to Westphal by arguing that Westphal has not fully appreciated the radicality of Derridean postmodernism, which holds that ‘Deconstruction is not only the continuous reminder that we are not God but it is the claim that the name of God is endlessly translatable into other names, like justice, and that we are in no position to stop this fluctuation’ (p. 294). Caputo’s point, I take it, is not that undecidability and translatability entail that any decision in favour of theism or atheism is ruled out in advance. Rather, the recognition of undecidability is recognition of the many risks and complexities of making any such decisions, forever exposed as they are to prejudices and influences that distort rather than track truth. It might seem, therefore, that Caputo is not rejecting (absolute) Truth, but only privileged access to such Truth – something Westphal has no difficulty accommodating (see Westphal 2005: 300). But this would be to miss Caputo’s radical reconceptualization of ‘truth’ in religion, which seeks to make nonsense of the idea of there being an exclusively true religion.
 - 24 See, for example, Caputo (2001), where on one page he endorses the epistemic claim that ‘We cannot, by science, philosophy, or religion, situate ourselves safely in some privileged spot above the mortal fray below having gained the high ground of a Privileged Access to the Way Things Are’ (p. 20); while on the very next page he supports the metaphysical thesis that ‘The secret is that there is no Secret, no capitalized Know-it-all Breakthrough Principle or Revelation that lays things out the way they Really Are and thereby lays to rest the conflict of interpretations’ (p.21).
 - 25 ‘The Dubliners’ refers to a roundtable discussion at Dublin in 1997, published in Kearney and Dooley (1999). ‘QE, 79’ refers to p.79 of this book.
 - 26 See Caputo (2006a: 2–7), for his somewhat technical understanding of ‘event’.
 - 27 I am relying here on Caputo’s recent response to critics in Simmons and Minister (2012).
 - 28 Admittedly, Caputo has attempted, in *Against Ethics* (1993b), to develop an account of ‘obligation’ that does not depend on the kind of metaphysical foundations I am suggesting here are necessary.

4

NEW ATHEIST APPROACHES TO RELIGION

Trent Dougherty and Logan Paul Gage

Serious argument depends on mutual respect, and this is often hard to engender when disagreements turn vehement.

(Dennett 2006/2007: 66)

If you encounter people who think it might still be intellectually respectable to believe in God in any literal sense, direct them to *The God Delusion*, where they will get their heads dismantled – and reassembled with a different perspective.

(Dennett 2006/2007: 64)

The advent of the twenty-first century brought with it a number of publishing crazes. While many of these were less than cerebral – often involving teens, wizards, and vampires – a more intellectual movement which came to be known as ‘the New Atheism’ produced a number of best-selling books (Dawkins 2006a; Dennett 2006; Harris 2004, 2006; Hitchens 2007). This led, in turn, to both a host of lesser, look-alike atheist volumes (Barker 2008; Loftus 2010; Mills 2006; Stenger 2007) and numerous anti-New Atheist tomes (Berlinski 2008; Crean 2007; Feser 2008; Hart 2010; McGrath and McGrath 2007). Despite the voluminous literature from the New Atheists, the most serious argument against God’s existence they have advanced has received surprisingly little attention from academic philosophers of religion, perhaps because the arguments tend to get lost in a flurry of rhetoric and one-upmanship. However, it is the job of serious philosophers to isolate and evaluate the important arguments. In this chapter, we therefore focus on the central argument from the New Atheism.

Taking a step back, one reason for little more than a hint of interest in the arguments of the New Atheists from philosophers of religion may be that of the four principal figures – Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris – only Dennett is a philosopher, and even he does not work in philosophy of religion. In addition, the theistic arguments of leading philosophers of religion like Richard Swinburne and Alvin Plantinga are conspicuously absent from their texts. In the five seemingly canonical works of the New Atheism, Plantinga is only mentioned in two footnotes of Dennett (2006: 406–7, 409), while Swinburne appears, but is repeatedly dubbed a ‘theologian’ in Dawkins (2006a: 58, 63, 65, 147), despite multiple appointments in philosophy, including nearly two decades at Oxford. Their lack of training and

neglect of key literature are surely among the reasons why the New Atheists are largely seen as bush-league by professional philosophers of religion.

Moreover, philosophers' reviews of the most well-known New Atheist work, Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, were highly critical. One might have expected unsympathetic reviews from theists. Plantinga (2007: 24), for instance, said it 'is full of bluster and bombast, but it really doesn't give even the slightest reason for thinking belief in God mistaken, let alone a "delusion"'. But some naturalists like Thomas Nagel also complained. 'Since Dawkins is operating mostly outside the range of his scientific expertise, it is not surprising that *The God Delusion* lacks the superb instructive lucidity of his books on evolutionary theory' (Nagel 2006: 25). Even many non-religious allies in Dawkins's own evolution community were quite harsh. H. Allen Orr (2007: 22) criticizes Dawkins for failing 'to engage religious thought in any serious way' – adding that while he used to think of Dawkins as a 'professional atheist', he's 'forced, after reading his new book, to conclude he's actually more an amateur'. And Michael Ruse (2009) claimed that Dawkins 'would fail any introductory philosophy or religion course'; and for this reason Ruse says *The God Delusion* made him 'ashamed to be an atheist'. With these sorts of attitudes toward the work of the New Atheists abounding, it is easy to see why philosophers of religion, both theists and naturalists, have paid so little sustained attention to their arguments. But we should not be too quick to dismiss them, for, in our view, even their failure may be quite instructive. And in this case, Dawkins at least seizes on the right *kind* of problem. This can lead to helpful clarification of key issues.

To be fair, the New Atheists sometimes claim that their works are intended as consciousness-raisers for average folk (Dawkins 2006a: 1); they are 'not an attempt to contribute to the academic micro-discipline of philosophical theology' (Dennett 2007: 59). But we assume here that insofar as they are intended to convince anyone, the arguments of the New Atheists are proffered as sound. Therefore, there is nothing unfair about evaluating them from a logical perspective. As Dawkins writes, 'If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down' (Dawkins 2006a: 5). Presumably he doesn't just want such readers to become atheists as a result of having a stroke while reading, but, rather, wants them to be convinced by his reasoning. And, we further assume, he doesn't want anyone convinced by bad reasoning, whether his or someone else's. In what follows, we examine in detail the most formidable argument against God's existence to emerge from the New Atheism: Dawkins's Ultimate 747 Gambit.

The New Atheists on the traditional arguments for God's existence

A surprising fact about the chief works of the New Atheists is the dearth of arguments one finds against the existence of God. One finds a number of attempts at *undercutting* defeaters for theistic belief – for example, evolutionary explanations of the origin of theistic belief in terms of certain cognitive mechanisms (Dawkins 2006a: 161–207; Dennett 2006: 97–246).¹ In addition, one finds a great deal about *particular* religious beliefs the New Atheists find silly, the scientific ignorance of swaths of the faithful, and the repeated assertion that belief in God is *unnecessary* (to be moral, to have a fulfilling life, etc.). But, unlike the professional literature (e.g., Schellenberg 2006; Draper and Dougherty 2013), one finds very little in the way of candidates for *rebutting* defeaters – i.e., positive argumentation against God's existence (or the probability thereof). A notable and commendable exception to this comes in Dawkins (2006a).

From the beginning, the God whose existence Dawkins seeks to disprove is not conceived as philosophers typically conceive him (i.e., as the omni-God of classical theism) but rather as 'a supernatural creator that is "appropriate for us to worship"' (Dawkins 2006a: 13). It is unclear

whether Dawkins thinks it appropriate to worship, for instance, a really good but not morally perfect Creator, a contingently perfect Creator, etc. Regardless, the hypothesis he targets claims that

(God Hypothesis) *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*

(Dawkins 2006a: 31)

He later clarifies that ‘Goodness is no part of the *definition* of the God Hypothesis, merely a desirable add-on’ (Dawkins 2006a: 108). This is an assumption in need of a great deal of defence, however, if he wishes his reasoning to apply to sophisticated theisms. According to Swinburne (1994: Chapters 6–7, especially 151ff), for example, God’s goodness follows from his being omniscient and omnipotent, along with a certain theologically neutral thesis in ethics: motivational internalism. According to motivational internalism, which finds its first major supporter in Socrates, when an agent conceives something as good, they are motivated to pursue it. Only weakness of will could prevent pursuit of the good. God, being omniscient, always knows what is good, and, being omnipotent, is always rightly motivated by it. Thus God’s perfect goodness is entailed by these two fundamental properties and included in his essence (and therefore his definition).

Before Dawkins presents his case against God’s existence, he is so kind as to discharge – in a mere thirty-three pages, no less – his ‘responsibility to dispose of the positive arguments for belief that have been offered through history’ (Dawkins 2006a: 73). And it is right that he do so. For even if he proffered an argument against the existence of God, theism might still be probable on the whole if there are good positive arguments. While space does not permit a detailed consideration of his ‘disposal’, it is worth noting that his limited understanding of God at the outset affects his ability to understand, let alone actually refute, these arguments. For example, Dawkins dismisses Thomistic regress arguments from motion/change, causation, and contingency, claiming that they ‘make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress’ (Dawkins 2006a: 77). Dawkins’s summaries and interpretations of Aquinas’s arguments are grossly inadequate and uncharitable. He fails, for example, to understand that Aquinas’s third way is not a regress argument from physico-temporal existence but from *contingent* existence. Dawkins (2006a: 77) complains that even if the argument were conceded there is no reason to endow the regress terminator with God’s other properties like omnipotence. But attentive readers will recall that, in Aquinas’s work of natural theology *Summa Contra Gentiles*, the five ways come at the beginning of a lengthy four-book series. Aquinas then proceeds to argue for this being’s other properties like eternity, goodness, and intelligence as corollaries of more basic properties like aseity.²

Where Dawkins sees an ‘unwarranted assumption’, philosophers of religion will quickly see a failure to understand the properties God is thought to possess. God has been thought to be pure actuality or being itself; so he is a pretty good candidate for stopping the change and causation regresses in that he doesn’t need something further to actualize his potential. God exists with *aseity* (i.e., he exists necessarily rather than receiving his being from another); thus he is a pretty good candidate for stopping the contingency regress – a far better candidate than Dawkins’s preferred solution of a “‘big bang singularity”, or some other physical concept as yet unknown’ which is presumably still contingent (Dawkins 2006a: 78). In short, Dawkins’s failure to appreciate what philosophers and theologians have traditionally meant by ‘God’ seriously hampers his ability to engage the classical arguments for God’s existence in a decorous manner. Dawkins likewise evaluates the ontological argument without considering modern versions (e.g., Plantinga 1974b). This may be because modern versions are presented in modal logic, in which Dawkins has no training. One would expect, however, that whereof one cannot speak,

thereof one should remain silent. Also absent are arguments engaging modern arguments from religious experience; he doesn't consider a single piece of contemporary religious epistemology like Alston (1991), Plantinga (2000), or Swinburne (2004: 293–327).

Other New Atheists are similarly dismissive of theistic arguments for God's existence. Dennett considers and rejects the classical theistic arguments in only seven pages (Dennett 2006: 240–46); fails to consider modern versions of the ontological argument (Dennett 2006: 241–42); and attacks the weakest possible version of the cosmological argument (Dennett 2006: 242). Hitchens, like Dawkins before him, contends that arguments such as Aquinas's five ways fail miserably for essentially the same reason Dawkins cites. He informs us that the metaphysical claims of religion are clearly false to those who only know how to apply Ockham's Razor to first-cause arguments. God, he alleges, is simply superfluous. First-cause arguments fail because

a cause will itself need another cause. ... Thus the postulate of a designer or creator only raises the unanswerable question of who designed the designer or created the creator. Religion and theology ... have consistently failed to overcome this objection.

(Hitchens 2007: 71)

Unlike Dawkins, Hitchens does not do readers the courtesy of laying out the logic of regress arguments for God's existence; nor does he bother to defend the proposition that it is possible for an infinite series of essentially ordered efficient causes or contingent beings to exist. Regardless, some versions of the cosmological argument do not assume the impossibility of such an infinite regress. Needless to say, the classical arguments deserve a bit more credit. But importantly, as we will see below, Hitchens is in great accord with Dawkins's emphasis on Ockham's Razor and the problem of the origin of any potential designer.

Dawkins on why there almost certainly is no God

Let us consider now Dawkins's positive case against God's existence. Dawkins kindly summarizes the six major points of his argument (Dawkins 2006a: 157–58). What Dawkins calls The Ultimate 747 Gambit³ begins with the frank admission that the greatest human minds have consistently puzzled over the origin of the appearance of design in the universe. Second, Dawkins notes the continual allure of attributing this appearance to the actual design of a designer. Third, however, this temptation should be suppressed, for only bottom-up explanations truly explain complexity.⁴ Fourth, Darwinian biology has shown that there is a bottom-up explanation for all such things in biology and thus that the appearance of biological design is only an appearance. Fifth, we don't really have an equivalent design-denying theory in physics, though there are possibilities like the multiverse theory. Yet, sixth, given the anthropic principle, even *possible* bottom-up explanations are obviously better than positing a designer. (Throughout the actual argument, however, the claim is much stronger: God is no explanation for the universe's apparent design *at all*.)

This argument, he claims, 'demonstrates that God, though not technically disprovable, is very improbable' and makes 'the God Hypothesis ... untenable' (Dawkins 2006a: 109, 158). This master argument, he maintains,

is a very serious argument against the existence of God, and one to which I have yet to hear a theologian give a convincing answer despite numerous opportunities and invitations to do so. Dan Dennett rightly describes it as 'an un rebuttable refutation, as devastating today as when Philo used it to trounce Cleanthes in Hume's Dialogues two centuries earlier'.

(Dawkins 2006a: 157)

Like Dennett, Harris (2006: 73) champions Dawkins's argument by name, and Hitchens (2007: 71) argues along similar lines. It is possible, of course, that Dawkins and company have not found a refutation of this argument because it is rather difficult to discern exactly how the argument proceeds, even with the major points summarized. Ganssle (2008) and Wielenberg (2009), for example, formalize the argument quite differently. The following is our best reconstruction:

- (1) If (i) God is no explanation at all of the apparently designed features of our world, and (ii) there are possible naturalistic explanations of the apparently designed features of our world, then God almost certainly does not exist, unless there are other good arguments for God's existence.
- (2) There are no good arguments for God's existence.
- (3) Thus, if (i) God is no explanation at all of the apparently designed features of our world, and (ii) there are possible naturalistic explanations of the apparently designed features of our world, then God almost certainly does not exist.
- (4) Any explanans more complex⁵ than its explanandum is no explanation at all of the explanandum.⁶
- (5) God, if he exists, is more complex than the apparently designed features of our world.⁷
- (6) Therefore, God is no explanation at all of the apparently designed features of our world.
- (7) There are possible naturalistic explanations of the apparently designed features of our world.
- (8) Therefore, God almost certainly does not exist.

There is much to be said here. But it is of utmost importance to observe that nearly all the heavy lifting is done by the underlying (and seemingly unexamined) principle of explanation seen in premise (4) and its crucial substitution instance in premise (5). As such, our discussion below will centre on these premises.

At this point, however, pause to consider how little of a burden Dawkins thinks an argument for atheism actually bears. Atheism need not even have very plausible or detailed stories about the naturalistic evolutionary pathways followed by many of the complex things in the biological domain; nor need it really have an explanation for the origin of the first life, the universe, consciousness, or the fine-tuning of the laws of physics. If God is no explanation at all for life or other apparently designed features of the universe, any *possible* naturalistic story will suffice to show that God is very unlikely to exist. This goes to show the very strong nature of the explanatory principle in premise (4).⁸ To put it another way, according to Dawkins (and the New Atheists who seem to approve of his argument), the atheist need not rely upon any empirical observations to show that God probably doesn't exist. After all, if God, by this explanatory principle of premise (4), is no explanation at all for apparent design, then no matter what the empirical facts, no matter how implausible current or future naturalistic explanations, God (the Creator) probably does not exist. This should indicate to the reader that while this argument appears to carry all the trappings of modern science and the prestige of sophisticated empirical investigation, at heart Dawkins's gambit is a philosophical argument relying upon an *a priori* principle about the nature of explanation. Thus we turn our attention to such principles.

Simplicity: syntactic and ontological

Dawkins requires a strong principle like that seen in premise (4) if his argument is to succeed. Recall premise (4):

- (4) Any explanans more complex than its explanandum is no explanation at all of the explanandum.

Notice that a substantive conclusion is derived from this principle. Thus it is a substantive epistemic principle leading to a conclusion about what we should believe; it is not simply a methodological principle saying that for practical purposes we should work with simpler theories. As we will see, this premise raises a host of difficult issues.

We should begin by pointing out that in science and philosophy of science the virtue of simplicity is typically treated as *one of many* virtues that a theory or explanatory entity might possess. Kuhn (1977: 321–22), for instance, famously lists several explanatory virtues, including accuracy, consistency, breadth of scope, simplicity, and fruitfulness. Dawkins appears, however, to see simplicity as *the* overriding theoretical virtue – a virtue so compelling that if an explanans lacks simplicity, or a sufficient degree of simplicity, the putative explanans is no explanation at all. This is a serious mistake. Considerations of simplicity do not typically arise until it is thought that the explanans possesses other virtues like empirical adequacy. If simplicity is a truth-indicator at all rather than a pragmatic rule of thumb – which has been the subject of on-going debate in the professional literature (Swinburne 1997; Swinburne 2001: chapter 4; Lycan 2002: 414; Rescher 2003: 232–33; White 2005; Grünbaum 2008) – then it is only a secondary virtue, not an automatic trump card.

In the literature, there are two closely related but distinct notions of simplicity which need careful disambiguation. It is not at all clear which Dawkins has in mind. He neither specifies what theory of simplicity he subscribes to nor cites any of the relevant literature, so we are left to speculate or, as we are doing here, systematically treat the major options. One sort of simplicity has been dubbed ‘syntactic simplicity’, a mathematical version of which is sometimes called ‘elegance’. This sort of simplicity consideration refers to the simplicity of the *theory* which supposedly explains a given phenomenon. That is, ‘it measures the number and conciseness of the theory’s basic principles’ (Baker 2011: 1). Throughout the history of science, many have thought it an important virtue of scientific theories that they explain a wide scope of phenomena from relatively few basic principles.

What then are we to make of the substitution instance in premise (5) if we understand premise (4) as a principle of syntactic simplicity/complexity? Is the God Hypothesis syntactically more complex than the phenomenon it is supposed to explain? Dawkins considers several natural phenomena that God is often thought to explain: the origin of life, the complexities of intra-cellular life, the fine-tuning of the physical constants, the origin of the universe itself, etc. At first glance, Dawkins’s own formulation of the God Hypothesis is so simple that it can be stated in a single sentence, some parts of which are superfluous:

(God Hypothesis) *there exists a super-human, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*

(Dawkins 2006a: 31)

And Dawkins is not alone in thinking that the God Hypothesis can be expressed concisely. The Anselmian tradition, for instance, thinks of God as ‘the greatest conceivable being’, or ‘the maximally perfect being’ (i.e., one that possesses all compossible positive perfections). In order to make the case that the God Hypothesis is more syntactically complex than the relevant explananda, Dawkins would need to specify how syntactic complexity should be assessed – which information-theoretic model, for example, should be utilized. Given that he makes no attempt to do so, it seems that he has another sort of complexity in mind.⁹ Dawkins appears less concerned with the complexity or simplicity of the God Hypothesis than with the complexity or simplicity of God himself.

The second major kind of simplicity seen in the literature has often been called ‘ontological simplicity’ or ‘parsimony’ – ‘roughly, the number and complexity of things postulated’ (Baker

2011: 4). Ockham's Razor, the dictum that we should not multiply entities beyond necessity, typically aims at capturing this latter understanding of simplicity. But again simplicity must be balanced against other virtues like explanatory power and fit with other data.¹⁰ Paul Thagard (1978: 87–89), for example, argues that an explanation with greater ontological commitments may well be preferable to simpler rivals if it holds greater consilience with other known facts. When expressed carefully, parsimony principles contain *ceteris paribus* clauses to indicate that they are to be invoked only when other things (e.g., explanatory power) are equal. In this regard, if God has the causal power to explain the origin of the universe while Dawkins's multiverse does not (depending on which universe-generating mechanism he adopts), then it is not clear that other things are equal and thus not clear that a principle of ontological simplicity even comes into play. That is, it is not clear that Dawkins has proposed an alternative causally sufficient explanation, and so there is no tie for simplicity considerations to break.

As far back as Aristotle (cf. *Posterior Analytics* 86a), simplicity has been considered an explanatory virtue. And invoking ontological simplicity has been quite common. Think for instance of Lavoisier arguing that chemistry can be explained just as well without an ontological commitment to phlogiston and that the theory with lesser ontological commitment is to be preferred. Yet even within ontological simplicity, we must make a distinction between what has been called quantitative parsimony and qualitative parsimony. Both kinds of parsimony tell us to prefer explanations with fewer ontological commitments. But quantitative parsimony considers theories committed to the existence of fewer *individual* things to be a virtue while qualitative parsimony considers theories committed to the existence of fewer *kinds* of things to be a virtue. Let's consider quantitative parsimony first.

Quantitative parsimony

Quantitative parsimony has not always been considered an explanatory virtue. David Lewis (1973: 87) and others dismiss this constraint on explanation. Is the hypothesis that a particular human brain contains x number of brain cells really automatically superior to the hypothesis that it contains $x+1$ cells? These philosophers insist that such *a priori* considerations have no place in the empirical domain. Still, perhaps Dawkins might have this understanding of the virtue of simplicity in mind in premises (4) and (5).

Recall that complexity is a comparative notion in premises (4) and (5). It is perhaps one thing for God to be postulated to explain a single complex feature of life on Earth, e.g., the advent of consciousness in evolutionary history. But recall now that Dawkins mentions many such features which have long appeared to be the product of design. If quantitative parsimony is what Dawkins has in mind, then God seems an especially parsimonious explanation for all of these features conjoined; even if we are only trying to explain the designed-looking features of the world Dawkins mentions, the number of entities entailed by such features far outnumber a single God. Just think of his definition of the God Hypothesis which says that there is one entity which explains '*the universe and everything in it*' (Dawkins 2006a: 31).¹¹ Moreover, compare the God Hypothesis with Dawkins's postulation of separate contingent explanations for all of the various designed features of life and the cosmos. Think of his multiverse hypothesis – a huge ballooning of ontological commitments¹² – to explain away some apparently designed features of only one universe (viz., ours). In other words, if premise (4) is a principle of quantitative parsimony, Dawkins's own explanation may be no explanation at all.

Perhaps Dawkins might object that we are counting the quantitative complexity of entities incorrectly. Dawkins objects, for instance, to Swinburne's claim that God is a simple hypothesis because he is a single substance (Dawkins 2006a: 148). In *The Blind Watchmaker* Dawkins

develops his view of complexity more thoroughly, arguing that a complex object (i) ‘has many parts’ (which he says is ‘a necessary condition’ for complexity), (ii) these ‘constituent parts are arranged in a way that is unlikely to have arisen by chance alone’, and (iii) the combined parts achieve some end (Dawkins 1996: 11–16). So Dawkins might argue that God still seems quantitatively complex (and more so than the relevant explananda) in that God has many parts.¹³ But of course in the most literal and obvious sense, God does not have any parts at all. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins seems to grant that God does not have literal parts but still maintains that God is complex. He cites with approval the view of Keith Ward that, ‘It is quite coherent ... to suppose that God, while indivisible, is internally complex’, and that of Julian Huxley, who ‘defined complexity in terms of “heterogeneity of parts”, by which he meant a particular kind of functional indivisibility’ (Dawkins 2006a: 150). Like Mackie (1982: 144), McGinn (1999: 86–87), and others, Dawkins may think that while God does not literally have parts he must be psychologically complex in some sense. God’s activity (both mental and in the world), argues Dawkins, entails his complexity:

A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right. Worse (from the point of view of simplicity), other corners of God’s giant consciousness are simultaneously preoccupied with the doings and emotions and prayers of every single human being – and whatever intelligent aliens there might be on other planets in this and 100 billion other galaxies.

(Dawkins 2006a: 149)

Yet it is still unclear exactly why God’s *activity* entails his *complexity*. Perhaps Dawkins thinks God’s way of knowing – for instance, his way of knowing ‘the emotions and prayers of every single human being’ – makes him complex in that God performs a complex process of ratiocination. But of course many theologians have thought that God must not reason discursively as we reason but in a simple manner. Following Augustine, Aquinas thinks God knows everything that can be known in a single timeless act and has a single all-conjunctive thought (cf. *Summa Theologica* Ia.14.7; Zagzebski 1991). Dawkins could quibble with the theology, but this just shows that one simply can’t do philosophy of religion without doing theology; and he does not seem ready, willing, or able to do the requisite theology. Also, Swinburne (1997; 2004: 55) argues in some detail that attributing infinite power is simpler than attributing any finite quantity and illustrates this from the history of science. Regardless, neither God’s world-sustaining activity nor his ability to hear prayers are part of Dawkins’s God Hypothesis. So they cannot be used to claim that God is necessarily complex.

However, one might claim that minds necessarily have certain mental ‘components’ which, even though they are not literal parts, make a mind complex. Perhaps minds are the sorts of things which necessarily have a Platonic or Freudian tri-partite structure. On nearly any psychological model, even ones with many more sub-structures, it is still far from obvious that God is more complex than the explananda of the God Hypothesis – namely, absolutely everything that exists in the universe, including all of the billions of stars, all of the atoms, the many layers of sub-atomic particles, etc. If you doubt this, jot down on paper all the properties of God you can think of and all the possible sub-units of his psychology – every single one. Defying Dawkins’s understanding of God, you can even list all the desirable add-ons, if you wish. On a separate sheet of paper, list all of the attributes of everything in the natural world. Begin with aardvarks. Now compare lists. If the former list is really longer than the latter, perhaps you have reason to think that God is more complex than everything in the natural world conjoined. But

our guess is that your list of God's properties is much shorter. Lastly in this regard, note that the divine properties may not be logically independent from each other but reduce to one or a few properties. In fact, Swinburne (1994: 154) argues that because God's essential properties all flow from his having 'pure, limitless, intentional power', he is 'the simplest kind of person there can be'.¹⁴

Yet even if we count God's 'parts' in this strained way, and even if we grant *arguendo* that God is more complex in this quantitative sense, and even if God's properties are logically independent of each other, is it true that an entity which is more quantitatively complex than its explanandum is no explanation at all, as premise (4) claims? It would appear not. Scientists posit new entities routinely, when the data call for it. Consider, for example, the postulation of a unique and comparatively quite complex, hitherto unobserved object like Neptune to account for a few simple perturbations in the orbit of Uranus. Neptune has its own origin which needs explanation; it has a unique and highly specified orbit, a multi-faceted material composition, atmosphere, climate, moons, etc. Not only has science postulated entities more complex than their explananda, but it has repeatedly done so as part of the best kind of science.

Qualitative parsimony

At this point Dawkins might suggest that we count in yet another manner to discern the ontological complexity in favour of explanatory entities. As we mentioned, some philosophers reject quantitative parsimony for qualitative parsimony. Dawkins might reply that his postulation of the multiverse still counts as a simple explanation, because the right way to count entities here is not by individual tokens but by new *kinds*. While the multiverse postulates more token entities, for instance, they are fundamentally the same kind as our universe. Thus our ontology is no larger than before we postulated the multiverse.

This is, to say the least, an unusual way to count, and the claim of Lewis and others that only the introduction of new kinds can bloat an ontology is disputed in the literature (Nolan 1997; Huemer 2009: 216). Further, note that counting by kinds is notoriously difficult to do. Are new species of plants and animals or different fundamental particles new kinds? If so, different universes are likely to have *many* new natural kinds indeed, and Dawkins' multiverse will far outstrip the ontological commitments of the average theist. But if these don't count as new kinds, why not? What principled way is there to decide what counts as a new kind given that everything resembles some other thing in *some* way?

Yet even if we accept this possible reply from Dawkins and interpret premise (4) as a principle of qualitative parsimony, there is no guarantee that God is a new kind and thus that premise (5) is true. Most of us accept the fact that consciousness or mind is present in our world. Given this, the burden would be on Dawkins to explain why God (who has always been seen as a conscious mind) is a fundamentally new kind of entity. Dawkins even calls him superhuman – that is, like a human but greater in power. God's mental powers may be of an unimaginably greater strength than ours, but it is far from obvious that an unimaginably great and powerful intelligent agent is a new *kind* of intelligent agent in the relevant sense. In fact, the great monotheistic traditions have always believed that human beings were created as conscious, rational beings in the image and likeness of a conscious, rational being. It is difficult to see, then, why God is necessarily a new kind.¹⁵

Mackie (1982: 100) appears to think that a disembodied mind like God would be a radically new kind of person. Physicalism has fallen on hard times in recent years (Chalmers 2010; Gillett and Loewer 2001; Kim 2005; Koons and Bealer 2010; Ney 2008), and it would be a disadvantage if Dawkins's super-argument *logically required* physicalism as a premise. It would further show that the argument is much more philosophically driven than scientifically driven.¹⁶ And even if

physicalism is true, it is far from clear that Cartesian minds would be new kinds of minds in the relevant sense.

But for the sake of argument, let us slice kinds finely and concede that God is different in kind from the intelligent agents we know. We might still wonder whether it is true that science never postulates fundamentally new kinds. Is it illegitimate for physicists to postulate superstrings, virtual particles, or five-dimensional membranes? Such hypotheses, we think, are clearly explanatory despite postulating new kinds (where kinds are sliced finely). Dawkins could still insist that God is a radically different kind than anything else we know simply because he is supernatural. But is this not precisely what Newton's detractors said? Gravity, with its action at a distance, was decried as an 'occult force', inappropriate to scientific explanation and too different in kind from truly scientific hypotheses. Ultimately, we must postulate a cause that is adequate to explain the data. And when our explananda include the origin of the entire universe or the existence of contingent beings – the whole natural order – a radically different sort of cause may be the only adequate one. We conclude, then, that even if Dawkins's premises (4) and (5) are understood as referring to qualitative simplicity, these premises remain false.

Simplicity and the primitive

Perhaps what bothers Dawkins most about theism is that it leaves the ultimate origin of the world – mind – unexplained. (This is so on Swinburne's view, anyway.¹⁷ On Plantinga's view, God is a logically necessary being.) But as Plantinga reminds us, all explanations, whether theistic or naturalistic, must end somewhere (Plantinga 2011: 27–28). Something must be posited as fundamental. Still, there may be a final important comparison between naturalism and theism vis-à-vis simplicity in this regard: which theory is simpler with respect to the number of *brute* entities and properties posited? An analogy: any logical system with any useful degree of power has an infinite number of theorems. However, materially equivalent systems can be axiomatized differently, and it is considered a breakthrough when the finite axiomatic base can be reduced by showing that one of the putative axioms is a theorem of some subset of the other axioms. Both naturalism and theism may have ever so many entailments and consequences. However, the right way to assess them is to compare their axiomatic bases in terms of their most fundamental postulates.

Theism postulates *one* brute fact, and everything else follows from it in conjunction with necessary truths about value and an appeal to the most familiar kind of explanation: personal explanation. Bare theism's brute fact is the existence of a person with two properties – knowledge and power¹⁸ – held in the simplest possible way (i.e., they are held essentially, with no limitations in power or duration). The explanation of every contingent truth is a function of the goodness of the corresponding state of affairs. Since there is no best world, at times an arbitrary choice must be made as to which initial world segment to actualize among sufficiently good initial world segments.

Naturalism lacks this kind of fundamental explanatory simplicity and systematicity. There will be quite a number of brute facts, not least of which is the existence of massive quantities of contingent beings: the fundamental particles out of which the physical universe is composed. Counting up the number of brute facts in naturalism will be difficult, but it seems that inevitably it postulates more than one brute existent with only two properties held in the simplest way. The only way to have a simpler theory, on the axiomatic theory of simplicity, is to postulate one entity with a *single* property held in the simplest way (and if many theologians are right and God only has one property, it would then be a draw). There is currently no naturalistic theory which meets that criterion. And if there were, it would have to be a very unfamiliar kind of property indeed. Moreover, as Swinburne (2004: 107) points out, even if there were a

naturalistic hypothesis of equivalent simplicity, by its very nature as an inanimate explanation it would seem to lack the explanatory power of theism – that is, it would not lead us to expect all of the general features of our universe that theism does.

For naturalists, positing God as the ultimate explanation of our universe would be an increase in ontic complexity in the sense that there would be one more entity in our shared ontology. As J.J.C. Smart (1985: 275–76) reminds us, however, increases in ontic complexity are often acceptable. If they were not, we should all be forced into anti-realism about the theoretical entities of physics and much else, indeed, eventually solipsism. The real question, according to Smart, is whether the existence of the postulated entity makes the *whole system* (our whole worldview) simpler and more unified. It is plausible that in positing fewer *fundamental* entities theism accomplishes this task of unification better than naturalism. At the very least, this possibility would have to be systematically addressed before Dawkins's argument, the most precise version of a widespread and central sentiment throughout the New Atheists, could be considered even potentially successful.

Conclusion

We have raised a serious concern for Dawkins's super-argument. It appears that no matter which of the major understandings of simplicity we apply, premises (4) and (5) are false. Whether the simplicity involved is construed as syntactic or ontological, as qualitative parsimony or quantitative parsimony, it is simply too strong to claim that any explanans more complex than the explanandum is either no explanation at all or automatically a bad explanation. In addition, we gave reason to think that theism is as simple as (or more so than) naturalism in terms of the number of *fundamental* entities and properties it postulates. Thus, if there is any merit in Dawkins's Ultimate 747 Gambit, it is yet to be shown. And as Dawkins's Gambit appears to be the strongest argument against the existence of God to emerge from the New Atheists, it is highly questionable if the movement provides any reason at all for the proposition that God does not exist.

In the end, one gets the sense that Dawkins just thinks that God is a counter-intuitive and mysterious entity unworthy of taking seriously in a scientific age. Yet Dawkins himself has argued that scientific explanations are often highly counter-intuitive without being objectionable on that account (Dawkins 2000: 178–79). It may be that, as Quine (1948: 23) said, some people 'have a taste for desert landscapes'. But The Ultimate 747 Gambit leaves the unfortunate impression that something about the nature of explanation in general or scientific explanation in particular gives this aesthetic preference the force of law. In *Unweaving the Rainbow*, even Dawkins acknowledges that scientific explanations themselves often lead to even deeper mysteries further up the causal chain. The discovery of the light spectrum, for instance, might have solved the puzzle of the rainbow. But as it led to the mind-boggling discoveries of Maxwell, Einstein, and others, it may have uncovered more mysteries than it resolved. 'Mysteries do not lose their poetry when solved. Quite the contrary; the solution often turns out more beautiful than the puzzle and, in any case, when you have solved one mystery you uncover others, perhaps to inspire greater poetry' (Dawkins 2000: 41). As it is in ordinary scientific explanation, so too it may be in ultimate explanation.¹⁹

Notes

- 1 For recent arguments on both sides of this debate, see Schloss and Murray (2009).
- 2 For an accurate introduction to these Thomistic arguments, see Copleston (1955: 114–30). And for a closer treatment, see Wippel (2000: 442–500).

- 3 The name is a reference to the alleged statement of Sir Fred Hoyle, the famed English astronomer and mathematician, that the probability of life's naturalistic origination on Earth was little greater than the probability of a tornado sweeping through a junkyard and assembling a Boeing 747.
- 4 As he does elsewhere, at this point Dawkins confuses the question of the *origin* of the designer ('Who designed the designer?') with his more important claim that top-down explanations of complexity are not explanations at all. As the origin of the designer 'problem' seems to evaporate with the classical understanding of God as a necessary being – one who exists in all possible worlds – in what follows we will focus solely on the issue of what makes for a good explanation. It is noteworthy, however, that Dawkins's own naturalistic multiverse proposal, unlike a necessarily existing being, may actually require an explanation for its origin (Collins 2005b: 658–60). For a discussion of who designed the designer, see Collins (2005a).
- 5 Dawkins repeatedly treats 'complexity' and 'improbability' as synonymous. We will only speak of complexity, for if Dawkins really intends improbability here, then his argument raises concerns of circularity.
- 6 'It is obviously no solution to postulate something even more improbable [or complex]' (Dawkins (2006a: 158, emphases added). Positing theism's complex God is, then, a 'total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation' (155).
- 7 This is clearly Dawkins's central premise in the 'Ultimate 747' argument (2006a: 120, 148–50, 154–57).
- 8 Oppy (2006a: 183–84) raises a related objection to a version of Paley's design argument, worrying that the God Hypothesis makes no explanatory progress. Paley's argument is put specifically in the language of function and suitability of constitution to function. We are not here defending any design argument let alone a specific version of a specific person's design argument. Oppy does not explicitly endorse any general principle about simplicity and explanation. Of course, a human has more by way of unexplained function and suitability of constitution to function than a hammer, until we have an explanation of humans. Yet that does not prevent us from appealing to humans as explanations of hammers. And since God has his nature non-contingently (the person who is President didn't have to be President, but the person who is God couldn't have failed to be God), so, according to this natural pattern, God is a more natural stopping point in explanation than a complex universe.
- 9 Our discussion of syntactic simplicity is woefully truncated. But given (i) that it seems unlikely that Dawkins is thinking of syntactic simplicity here, and (ii) our spatial limitations, this is unfortunate but necessary.
- 10 It is plausible that fit with other theories can be reduced to either simplicity or explanatory power. This is the approach Swinburne takes. Others maintain a multiplicity of virtues (Thagard 1978; Harman 1965; Lipton 2004).
- 11 It would be open to Dawkins to argue that the entirety of nature is just one, single substance, but this seems ad hoc and inconsistent with other things Dawkins says, such as that there are trees and birds. Perhaps he would bite the bullet and say that there really are no trees and birds because they are just modes of the One Substance. But we will not pursue this suggestion further here.
- 12 There are two ways to think of the multiverse hypothesis: either it increases the number of universes or it increases the complexity of the one mega-universe. On either way of proceeding the view is anything but quantitatively parsimonious.
- 13 While it may at first glance appear otherwise, when Dawkins alleges that God is more complex than that which he is invoked to explain, he is not taking issue with the doctrine of 'divine simplicity'. He shows no awareness of the distinction (or lack thereof) between God's essence and his existence.
- 14 Anselm, Aquinas, Leibniz and others all argued for a similar unity among the divine properties.
- 15 There is the slight complication that Aquinas and others thought that God *is* his nature. But because Dawkins denies God's simplicity in any sense, this seems to be of no help to him.
- 16 Objection: Physicalism is science-driven. Reply: (i) that is a very contentious claim; (ii) current physics, via various quantum routes, is more mind-friendly than past physics, and there is simply no telling how mind-friendly future physics might be.
- 17 This section is a greatly condensed version of Dougherty's contribution to Draper and Dougherty (2013).
- 18 Unlimited power plausibly entails perfect freedom, and as noted earlier, Swinburne (2004: 99ff) argues that God's perfect knowledge, power, and freedom entail his perfect moral goodness and other essential divine attributes. See Swinburne (2010) for his latest on God and simplicity.
- 19 We wish to thank Brad Monton for helpful feedback.

5

WITTGENSTEINIAN APPROACHES TO RELIGION

Genia Schönbaumsfeld

I

The myths surrounding Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief are tenacious and enduring. In the contemporary literature, for example, Wittgenstein has variously been labelled a fideist (Nielsen and Phillips 2005), a non-cognitivist (Hyman 2001; Schroeder 2007), and a relativist of sorts (Kusch 2011). The underlying motivation for many of these attributions seems to be the thought that the content of a belief can clearly be separated from the attitude taken towards it. Such a 'factorization model' which construes religious beliefs as consisting of two independent 'factors' – the belief's content and the belief-attitude – appears to be behind the idea that one could, for example, have the religious attitude alone (fideism, non-cognitivism) or that religious content will remain broadly unaffected by a fundamental change in attitude (Kusch). In the present contribution I will argue that such a model faces insuperable philosophical and exegetical difficulties, and, consequently, that the conceptions that spring from it are mistaken.

II

Wittgenstein's conception of religious belief in many ways mirrors his philosophical concerns more generally. Just as Wittgenstein rejects the idea that philosophy is a theoretical exercise whose purpose consists in developing explanatory hypotheses about the hidden workings of language and the world, so, too, he jettisons the thought that Christianity offers us a philosophical theory about what goes on in a celestial realm. Instead, he shares Kierkegaard's insight that truth 'in the sense in which Christ is the truth is not a sum of statements, not a definition etc., but a life' (Kierkegaard 1991: 205).

One does not, Wittgenstein believes, come to Christianity through argument and intellectual deliberation; it is rather the shape of one's life and experiences that will (or will not) teach one a use for the Christian concepts. The exigencies of life may, as it were, thrust these concepts upon one. It is for this reason that Wittgenstein (1977: 64e) says:

It strikes me that a religious belief could only be something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference. Hence, although it's *belief*, it's really a way of living, or a way of assessing life. It's passionately seizing hold of *this* interpretation.

This passage has been subjected to an enormous amount of misinterpretation. So, for example, Wittgenstein is often berated, by believers and unbelievers alike, that by emphasizing faith's

‘existential’ dimension – that is to say, its embeddedness in religious *practice* – Wittgenstein has thrown out the baby with the bathwater: once all the philosophy that is written about Christianity is put aside,¹ one would seem to be left with nothing more than adherence to a ‘doctrineless’ form of life. As Kai Nielsen (Nielsen and Phillips 2005: 116), for instance, says: ‘The most crucial error common to both Nietzsche and Wittgenstein is to argue that Christian practice is everything and Christian belief, belief that involves doctrines, is nothing.’²

John Hyman takes a similar view. He glosses Wittgenstein’s remark in the following way: ‘If a religious belief is something like a passionate commitment to a system of reference – as opposed to a passionate commitment to the truth of an empirical proposition – then a religious belief cannot be *true* or *false*. And Wittgenstein held that religious beliefs cannot be *reasonable* or *unreasonable* either, if that means that they can or cannot be justified’ (2001: 6).³

But the matter may be much more complicated than these criticisms would suggest. I have previously argued, for example, that, as in his philosophical practice more generally, the point of Wittgenstein’s remarks is to challenge the very terms in which the debate is cast. In other words, Wittgenstein wants to show that it is itself an illusion to suppose that we are confronted by two exhaustive alternatives here: either adherence to a set of metaphysical beliefs (with certain ways of acting following from these beliefs), or passionate commitment to a way of life; there is no third way.

The thought that there cannot be any middle ground here is fuelled by the fact that we are naturally prone to suppose that it is possible neatly to separate the meaning of words from their use, and so we might be tempted to believe, as many commentators do, that it is possible to inspect the words alone in order to find out whether they make sense or not. John Cottingham (2009a: 209) picturesquely calls such an approach applying the ‘fruit juicer’ method to modes of thought of which one is sceptical: to require ‘the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what [one] take[s] to be the irrelevant pulpy mush of context’. It is this tendency, Cottingham argues, that Wittgenstein’s emphasis on praxis – in both religious and other contexts – is supposed to preclude.

Stephen Mulhall, who criticizes Hyman’s paper (see Mulhall 2001), would concur, arguing that Wittgenstein’s whole approach consists of showing that ‘no one can so much as understand what a belief in God’s existence amounts to without grasping the location of that concept in the grammatical network of religious concepts that Wittgenstein here describes as a system of reference’ (101). If this is correct, then it makes no sense to think, as Hyman does, that one can first establish the truth of the proposition that God exists and then use it as a reason for adopting the system of reference. Rather, one could not acquire a belief in God’s existence ‘without both understanding and committing oneself to the broader grammatical system in which the concept of God has its life’ (ibid.).

Martin Kusch has recently followed Nielsen (2000) in arguing that this kind of conception renders religious language incommensurable⁴ with ordinary discourse: ‘[On this account] Wittgenstein is unable to pick out the propositional contents of religious beliefs since he cannot translate religious language into his own ... the languages of the believer and the non-believer are, in important respects, incommensurable’ (Kusch 2011: 38). Kusch attributes this view to Cyril Barrett and myself:

Barrett and Schönbaumsfeld hold that for Wittgenstein religious language involves a ‘reorientation’ of ordinary language. Moreover, they imply that the non-believer can come to grasp the meaning of religious language only by converting. And they suggest that the non-believer suffers from a kind of conceptual aspect-blindness.

(Kusch 2011: 39)

In spite of this, Kusch is aware that I do not wish to attribute the incommensurability thesis to Wittgenstein. Quoting from Schönbaumsfeld (2007: 193):

Religious discourse cannot ... be 'self-contained' or 'sealed-off' from other linguistic 'domains', for it is precisely the quotidian senses of words that make possible the 'renewed' uses of applications of these words in religious contexts. In this respect, religious discourse, like artistic language-use, involves an *extension* or *transformation* of everyday discourse and consequently can't be 'incommensurable' with it.

Nevertheless, Kusch (2011: 40) claims to be unconvinced by this response for the following reasons. Firstly, he thinks that the fact that religious discourse 'renews' ordinary words does not establish that this discourse is translatable into those words. Secondly, Kusch contends that if God's intervention is needed to give the religious believer 'almost new words', then what – short of a conversion – can enable the non-believer to understand these words? Finally, Kusch believes that the parallel that I draw between artistic and religious language-use cannot demonstrate commensurability, since grasping religious discourse for the first time seems to amount to a fundamental change in form of life, while understanding an artistic metaphor does not. In the next sections, I will respond to Kusch's critique of my conception and raise some worries for his alternative view.

III

I argued previously that in order to grasp the sense of religious expressions, one not only needs to understand what the 'atoms' – the individual words comprising the utterance – mean in *other* contexts (in contexts, say, in which one has first learnt the uses of these words), but what the sentence as a whole means, and this can only be done if one understands how the words are functioning in *this* specific context; one must, as it were, understand their technique of application *here*. This is why Wittgenstein (1966: 55) says that in one sense he understands all the religious person who believes in a Last Judgement says, because he understands, for example, the ordinary words 'God' or 'separate',⁵ but that, in another sense, he doesn't understand the sentence *at all*, for, in this particular context, he has no grasp of how these familiar words are used: 'my normal technique of language leaves me'.

Does this imply, as Kusch (2011: 40) seems to believe, that religious language is therefore incommensurable with other forms of discourse? No. The reasons for this are as follows. One cannot, for example, explain what 'God's eye sees everything' means to someone who does not understand the habitual senses of the words comprising the sentence. Neither could one explain what 'eye' means in this context by pointing, say, to God's 'anatomy', since it is obvious that the word 'eye' in the sentence 'God's eye sees everything' is not functioning in the same way as the word 'eye' does in the sentence 'a racoon's eye can see in the dark'. It is equally obvious that one could not apply the word 'eye' to God, if one could not employ the word 'eye' in everyday contexts – if, that is, one could not understand 'a racoon's eye can see in the dark' and similar sentences. So, religious discourse cannot be radically discontinuous with ordinary language-use, since it is parasitic upon it.

Of course Kusch is right that it does not follow from the fact that there cannot be radical discontinuity here, that one is therefore able fully to translate religious discourse into another idiom. But I have never claimed that this is either possible or necessary. For, arguably, many linguistic domains are 'irreducible' (not incommensurable!) in this way – aesthetic, ethical and even psychological language-uses springing immediately to mind. Many unsuccessful philosophical attempts have been made to 'translate' these forms of discourse into another, primarily into a kind of 'language of science' perhaps.

To be fair to Kusch, he claims to agree that learning about the grammar of religious expressions involves learning about the religious form of life. But it is not easy to see how that can be compatible with the ‘factorization’ model that he espouses.⁶ For if the grammar of religious expressions can only be learnt from their context – that is to say, their embeddedness within the religious form of life – then one has to immerse oneself in that practice if one is to have any hope of understanding religious language. This does not imply, as Kusch mistakenly seems to assume, that one actually has to *convert* in order to be able to learn the grammar of religious expressions – for example, one does not have to be a religious believer to understand that the depth grammar of the concept ‘God’ is not akin to that of a super-empirical object (on Wittgenstein’s view) – but it does mean that a lot of familiarity with and sensitivity to the practices in question is necessary.

Furthermore, there may well be *some* aspects of religious discourse that will continue to remain opaque to one, quite possibly regardless of whether one is a religious believer or not. As Wittgenstein (1977: 32e) says:

In religion every level of devoutness must have its appropriate form of expression which has no sense at a lower level. This doctrine, which means something at a higher level, is null and void for someone who is still at the lower level; he *can* only understand it *wrongly* and so these words are *not* valid for such a person.

In other words, the greater one’s spiritual development, the more sense some religious doctrines might make. But, again, this does not radically distinguish religious from other forms of discourse, because it is also true in art, ethics, and philosophy that the greater one’s abilities and understanding, the greater the horizons of significance that will open themselves up to one. Indeed, when coming to see or to experience something for the first time, one often calls this having an ‘epiphany’ – something that seems very close to the conceptual ‘reorientation’ or transformation that I speak of in the religious domain. In fact, it seems very close to how Wittgenstein thinks of his own philosophical activity, which he at one time describes as being like the shift from alchemy to chemistry.⁷

So, transitions are fluid here: the basic grammar of religious expressions can be learnt by believers and unbelievers alike by attending closely to the religious form of life and the use to which religious expressions are put in them. But *some* aspects of religious doctrine and practice may remain closed to one if one is not a religious believer. This should not be surprising. Actual participants in a practice always have a different perspective from outsiders to the practice – it is one thing to *learn about* driving a car, and quite another actually to drive it.

Wittgenstein (1977: 33e) seems to have this distinction in mind when he says that he could only utter the word ‘Lord’ with meaning, if he lived completely differently:

I read: ‘No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.’ – And it is true: I cannot call him *Lord*; because that says nothing to me. I could call him the ‘paragon’, ‘God’ even – or rather, I can understand it when he is called thus; but I cannot utter the word ‘Lord’ with meaning. *Because I do not believe* that he will come to judge me; because *that* says nothing to me. And it could say something to me, only if I lived *completely* differently.

What Wittgenstein is saying here is that some religious expressions can be understood even if one doesn’t share the perspective of the believer, while others will remain opaque or meaningless if one is not a participant in the religious form of life, and hence lives ‘completely differently’. This

already gives a fairly clear indication that Wittgenstein would reject a ‘factorization’ model of religious belief, for the significance of this passage precisely consists in bringing out that the meaning of religious contents is not independent of one’s ‘belief-attitude’, which, in turn, cannot be specified independently of the way in which one lives one’s life.

IV

On Kusch’s alternative conception, on the other hand, a distinction can be drawn between what he calls ‘ordinary’ and ‘extraordinary’ belief-attitudes that are directed towards the same propositional content:

Ordinary belief-attitudes are found in empirical and scientific beliefs; extraordinary belief-attitudes are characteristic of religious beliefs. [The *Lectures and Conversations on Religious Belief* allow] that one and the same proposition – for instance, *that there will be a Last Judgement* – can serve as a propositional content for both an extraordinary and for an ordinary belief-attitude.

(Kusch 2011: 37)

Kusch claims that ‘ordinary’ beliefs have the following five features. 1. They tend to be described as ‘opinions’, ‘views’ or ‘hypotheses’. 2. They are more or less reasonable; more or less well supported by evidence. 3. They are candidates for knowledge. 4. ‘I am not sure’ or ‘possibly’ are often someone else’s responses to a profession of such beliefs. 5. They don’t normally have the power to change our lives. ‘Extraordinary’ beliefs, on the other hand, differ in all these respects:

‘Faith’ and ‘dogma’ rather than ‘opinion’ and ‘hypothesis’, are the non-technical terms commonly used for extraordinary beliefs; extraordinary beliefs are not on the scale of being confirmed or falsified by empirical evidence; although ‘extraordinary’ beliefs are the ‘firmest’ of all beliefs, they are not candidates for knowledge; they are tied to strong emotions and pictures; they guide people’s life; and their expression can be the culmination of a form of life.

(Kusch 2011: 38)

For example, the person holding an ‘ordinary’ belief that God exists takes the same attitude towards the belief’s propositional content as he would towards an ordinary empirical prediction – i.e. he will regard it as more or less probable or as more or less well-supported by evidence – whereas the person holding an ‘extraordinary’ belief that God exists has a completely different, entirely ‘firm’, attitude not grounded in empirical evidence at all (Kusch 2011: 38; 2012: 12).

It is hard to see how this can be right. For, among other things, it is difficult to square with the central Wittgensteinian notion that meaning is use and that practice gives words their sense. Compare, for example, the following remarks:

Actually I should like to say that ... the *words* you utter or what you think as you utter them are not what matters, so much as the difference they make at various points in your life. How do I know that two people mean the same when each says he believes in God? ... *Practice* gives the words their sense.

(Wittgenstein 1977: 85e)

For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word ‘meaning’ it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language.

(Wittgenstein 1953: §43)

If Wittgenstein is right, one struggles to make sense of the idea that the attitude one takes towards a belief makes *no* (or little) difference to the belief's propositional content. For taking an 'ordinary' belief-attitude towards the proposition that God exists seems to have obvious implications for what 'God exists' means. So, for instance, the person who, like Wittgenstein's Father O'Hara from the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, thinks that there is 'scientific' evidence for the existence of God, and consequently, in Kusch's parlance, has an 'ordinary' belief-attitude, will take the proposition that God exists to be a claim about a super-empirical object, while for Wittgenstein this is a misguided way of thinking about God.⁸ As Wittgenstein (1977: 50e) says: 'The way you use the word "God" does not show *whom* you mean – but, rather, what you mean'. On Wittgenstein's conception, in other words, 'God' does not denote some *thing* that one could encounter independently of having the concept in the sense that one could encounter a unicorn or the Loch Ness monster, say, if there happened to be such things. That is to say, Wittgenstein believes that while the surface grammar of the word 'God' functions in many ways analogously to that of an outlandish person, its depth grammar is actually quite different. This is shown, for example, by the fact that one cannot 'overhear' God talking to someone else – something that religious believers do not explain by reference to God's either being mute or out of earshot. But, if this is right, it seems that Father O'Hara and Wittgenstein's religious believer cannot, *pace* Kusch, believe the same things. For Father O'Hara believes that 'God' denotes a super-powerful entity for which there can be scientific evidence, whereas Wittgenstein's religious believer thinks it does not make sense to conceive of God in this way. *A fortiori* the propositional content of their respective beliefs must be different, even if O'Hara and Wittgenstein's religious believer use the same words to describe their beliefs.

If this is correct, then 'content' and 'attitude' cannot be divorced from each other in the way that the 'factorization' model requires. And this, in turn, means that understanding religious discourse is not as straightforward as one might, perhaps, at first imagine. For if belief-attitude and content are not distinct 'factors', it cannot be taken for granted that the religious believer and the atheist will be able to understand each other simply in virtue of using the same words. As Wittgenstein (1966: 55, emphasis added) says:

If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgement Day, in the sense in which religious people have a belief in it, I wouldn't say, 'No. I don't believe there will be such a thing'. It would seem to me utterly crazy to say this. And then I give an explanation: 'I don't believe in ... ', *but then the religious person never believes what I describe.*

If this is right, no clear distinction can be drawn between 'living in a certain way' and 'believing certain things', as *genuine* beliefs can never be divorced from and understood completely independently of the difference they make in one's life. So, Wittgenstein would reject the idea that beliefs are composed of two independent 'factors' – the belief's content and the belief-attitude. Rather, for Wittgenstein, 'content' and 'attitude' are mutually interdependent, since it is not possible to make sense of one without the other.

This also helps one to see why, *pace* Hyman and Nielsen, Wittgenstein cannot be a non-cognitivist who seeks to reduce the content of religious beliefs to the expression of emotional attitudes. For if one cannot 'factor out' the attitude from the content, neither can one reduce one to the other. Therefore, when Wittgenstein (1977: 28e) says, for example, that 'Christianity is not a doctrine, not, I mean, a theory about what has happened and will happen to the human soul, but a description of something that actually takes place in human life', he does not thereby mean that Christianity has no cognitive content. Rather, what he is suggesting is that being

able, say, to recite the Creeds or Catholic dogma is not sufficient for having a proper understanding of religious concepts, as this requires being able to see religious utterances non-instrumentally, that is to say, it requires being able to see their *point* and aptness rather than their ability, as it were, to convey 'information' about God. And being able to see this is not possible, if Wittgenstein is right, independently of having some familiarity and grasp of the Christian form of life and the phenomenology of experience that gave rise to it. Hence, when Wittgenstein says that the important thing with regard to the Christian 'doctrine' is to understand 'that you have to change your *life*' or 'the *direction* of your life',⁹ he is not implying that it is somehow possible to do this *without* committing oneself to the Christian claims. For to say that much more than rote-reciting is required, is not to say that therefore the 'doctrine' – the Christian claims – are irrelevant, as this would be as absurd as thinking that because a song can be sung both with and without expression, one could have the expression without the song (Wittgenstein (1966: 29)).

Consequently, it is not the case, as is often supposed, that Wittgenstein denies that religious people believe different things from non-religious people. What he *is* denying is that any sense can be made of *what* those things are independently of paying attention to the form of life (or practice) which gives them sense.

V

It is an upshot of Kusch's view that a criticism, on the basis of shared standards, of the very adoption of extraordinary standards, is ruled out. Following Bernard Williams, Kusch (2011: 52) calls this a 'relativism of distance'. A 'relativism of distance' implies that 'disagreements' between people who hold extraordinary beliefs and those that do not, can be 'faultless'. I agree that there can be 'faultless *difference*' between religious believers and those who lack religious attitudes, but I think it is misleading to call this a form of relativism.

The reason why I would prefer to talk of 'faultless difference' rather than 'faultless disagreement' is of course that, contrary to Kusch, I do not think that the content of 'ordinary' and 'extraordinary' beliefs is the same. Consequently, believer and unbeliever do not necessarily have a 'disagreement' at all, for this presupposes that one can deny what the other affirms. But if, as I have argued, one first has to learn the grammar of religious beliefs before one can have disputes about them with the believer, then one cannot criticize religious beliefs by inspecting the words, or the putative 'propositional' content, alone. Rather, what Wittgenstein's view entails is that in order for disagreement to be possible, a shared common background must first be acquired that enables one to understand what, exactly, it is that the other is committed to. Without this being in place, one would not be able to contradict what the religious person says:

Suppose that someone believed in the Last Judgement, and I don't, does this mean that I believe the opposite to him, just that there won't be such a thing? I would say: 'not at all, or not always' ... 'Do you contradict the man?' I'd say: 'No'.

(Wittgenstein 1966: 53)

On Kusch's conception, Wittgenstein is not contradicting the religious believer, because while the latter has an 'extraordinary' belief-attitude to the proposition that there will be a Last Judgement, Wittgenstein merely has the 'ordinary', 'empirical' belief-attitude towards there not being such a thing. Since these belief-attitudes are distinct, there is no conflict between what the two parties say. The reason why Kusch is nevertheless happy to speak of an 'extraordinary' disagreement here is that even though the two parties do not straightforwardly contradict

each other (since they have different belief-attitudes), they do ‘disagree’ about the *content* of their beliefs (since one of them believes that there will be a Last Judgement, while the other doesn’t):

To fully appreciate the contingency of having or lacking extraordinary beliefs is to recognize that the ‘extraordinary disagreement’ between the believer and the unbeliever may well be faultless: neither side need have made a mistake. This faultless epistemic peer disagreement is *not fully reasonable* – neither side is able to identify its evidence fully, not even to himself or herself. But this disagreement is *not altogether unreasonable either*: each side may well have done its best on the basis of its historically contingent sensibility.

(Kusch 2012: 22)

This is convincing only if one can make sense of the idea of ‘extraordinary’ evidence that Kusch invokes earlier on (2012: 14). For *prima facie*, one might wonder why, if ‘extraordinary’ beliefs have exactly the same content as ‘ordinary’ beliefs, but are just held more firmly on what seems to be flimsier evidence, one should so much as allow ‘extraordinary’ beliefs any kind of epistemic credibility. As Wittgenstein (1966: 57–58, 61–62) says:

They [religious believers] base things on evidence which taken in one way would seem exceedingly flimsy. They base enormous things on this evidence. Am I to say they are unreasonable? I wouldn’t call them unreasonable. I would say, they are certainly not *reasonable*, that’s obvious. ... If you compare it [religious belief] with anything in Science which we call evidence, you can’t credit that anyone could soberly argue: ‘Well, I had this dream ... therefore ... Last Judgement’. You might say: ‘For a blunder, that’s too big.’ If you suddenly wrote numbers down on the blackboard, and then said: ‘Now, I’m going to add,’ and then said: ‘2 and 21 is 13’ etc. I’d say: ‘This is no blunder’.

What Wittgenstein seems to be saying here is that if one believes that religious beliefs are based on ‘evidence’ in the way that scientific beliefs, for example, can be said to be based on evidence, then one is either, like Father O’Hara, cheating oneself, or irrational. For, if one *really* believed that it made sense to argue ‘dream – therefore Last Judgement’ or ‘miracles – therefore Son of God’, then this is no ordinary mistake – that is to say, no simple blunder for which there is a place in the ‘system’. Since Wittgenstein, unlike the author of *The Golden Bough*, for example, does not want to come to the conclusion, however, that ‘the whole of mankind does all that [i.e. engages in religious practice] out of sheer stupidity’,¹⁰ he tries to find an alternative explanation: ‘There are cases where I’d say he’s mad, or he’s making fun. Then there might be cases where I look for an entirely different interpretation altogether’ (ibid. 62). The ‘entirely different interpretation’ might comprise, for example, a refusal to interpret religious beliefs as being in any way *analogous* to scientific beliefs. That is to say, the believer isn’t necessarily mad, but might rather be engaged in a different kind of activity: ‘Whether a thing is a blunder or not – it is a blunder in a particular system ... You could also say that where we are reasonable, they are not reasonable – meaning they don’t use *reason* here’ (ibid. 59). But it is a mistake to think, as Kusch does, that adopting such an approach is not going to have serious implications for the *content* of what is believed, but will merely affect one’s belief-attitude.

For instance, when Wittgenstein is criticizing Father O’Hara’s conception of religious belief, he isn’t *merely* criticizing his *attitude*:

Father O'Hara is one of those people who make it a question of science ... I would definitely call O'Hara unreasonable. I would say, if this is religious belief, then it's all superstition. But I would ridicule it, not by saying it is based on insufficient evidence. I would say: here is a man who is cheating himself. You can say: this man is ridiculous because he believes, and bases it on weak reasons.

(*ibid.* 57–59)

Wittgenstein is here taking issue with the very idea of trying to make Christianity probable. That is to say, Wittgenstein thinks that it is 'a confusion of the spheres', a kind of category mistake, to speak with Kierkegaard,¹¹ to treat a religious question as if it were a scientific question that could be settled by appeal to empirical evidence. It is this confusion that, according to Wittgenstein, turns religious belief into mere superstition – that is to say, into a form of false science.

Kusch (2012: 13) agrees that Father O'Hara's religious belief is unreasonable:

Superstition is unreasonable religious belief; in O'Hara's case it is religious belief falling way short of the appropriate extraordinary belief attitude ... Put differently, what might be convincing evidence (even for the believer) against religious belief taken as ordinary, is not at all evidence against extraordinary belief.

The reason why Kusch (2012: 13–14) believes that 'ordinary' evidence is not evidence against 'extraordinary' belief is the following:

Wittgenstein is adamant that one does not develop an attitude of extraordinary belief in response to mere ordinary evidence. Instead, it is the course of one's life as a whole that either causes one to have extraordinary beliefs or causes one not to have them. This cause is not a 'brute cause': it does not bring about extraordinary belief in the way a hit over the head or a drug might bring about a headache. It is a cause in terms of which the religious believer is able to make sense of his extraordinary beliefs, at least partially. And hence it seems appropriate to speak of this cause as 'extraordinary evidence'.

I agree with Kusch that 'Wittgenstein is adamant that one does not develop an attitude of extraordinary belief in response to mere ordinary evidence', but I'm not sure it is appropriate to speak of this cause as 'extraordinary evidence'. Consider, for example, the following remark:

Life can educate one to a belief in God. And *experiences* too are what bring this about; but I don't mean visions and other forms of sense experience which show us 'the existence of this being', but, e.g., sufferings of various sorts. These neither show us God in the way a sense impression shows us an object, nor do they give rise to *conjectures* about him. Experiences, thoughts – life can force this concept on us.

(Wittgenstein 1977: 86e)

If 'life' can educate one to a belief in God or 'force' this concept upon one, is it therefore correct to say that 'life' provides 'extraordinary' evidence for the existence of God? For how, one might wonder, can *life* provide *evidence* for anything? One might just as well say that life provides one with 'extraordinary evidence' for animism, the truth of scientology or witches. And if, furthermore, animists, scientologists, and witch-worshippers can 'faultlessly' disagree, then one would have, not a 'relativism of distance', but *rampant* relativism.

Kusch himself admits (in an email exchange) that one cannot take an extraordinary belief-attitude to just anything – for instance to Wayne Rooney’s being a fool (Kusch’s example). But, if so, then some criteria are needed that allow one to draw a line here, and it is hard to see where they might plausibly come from. What is more, it seems that such criteria would have to be driven by the *content* of what is believed, and this appears to be in tension with Kusch’s contention that one can take both an ‘ordinary’ and an ‘extraordinary’ attitude to the same propositional content. For if certain contents are, as it were, more ‘extraordinary attitude-apt’ than others – which they would have to be if one wants to rule out that one can take an extraordinary attitude to ‘just anything’ – then all sorts of ‘new’ forms of ‘unreasonable’ belief will become possible. For example, one can take up an ‘ordinary’ attitude to something that is, in itself, an ‘extraordinary’ proposition, or take an ‘extraordinary’ attitude to something that ‘really’ only has empirical content. It is difficult to see either how one could make sense of such ‘errors’, or what it might mean to ascribe an ‘intrinsic’ content to a proposition. For the latter is clearly inconsistent with Wittgenstein’s idea that meaning is use and therefore context-dependent.

For these reasons, the better option is to read Wittgenstein as rejecting altogether the notion that faith rests on an evidential basis.¹² Does that imply, though, that, on my conception, religious belief is utterly *groundless*? If by ‘groundless’ one means ‘not based on any reasons whatsoever’, the answer is ‘no’; if by ‘groundless’ one means that belief in God is not ‘evidentially grounded’ in the way that satellite pictures of the Earth, say, provide evidential grounds for the proposition ‘the Earth is round’, the answer is ‘yes’. In other words, one’s life experiences might give one reason to believe in God, but those reasons are not *evidence* – not even ‘extraordinary’ evidence – for God’s existence. For ‘evidence’ ought to be something that everyone can independently appeal to as a justification, but this is not possible in the religious case. For example, one cannot extract a general rule from experiences that might motivate religious belief – i.e. one cannot reasonably argue that personal suffering proves the existence of God or will make one religious. Consequently, the overall shape of one’s life might give one (personal) reasons to believe in God, but it is misleading to call this a form of ‘evidence’. As Wittgenstein (1977: 84e) says:

Unshakable faith. (E.g. in a promise.) Is it less certain than being convinced of a mathematical truth? – (But does that make the language games any more alike!)

Analogously, one might say: it is possible to employ the phrase ‘extraordinary’ evidence in the religious context, but that does little to make it any more similar to what one ordinarily calls ‘evidence’. The language games are very different here. It is for these reasons that Wittgenstein thinks that religious believer and atheist do not necessarily have a disagreement at all, but are rather engaged in different activities.

VI

If what I have argued in this chapter is correct, Kusch’s ‘factorization’ model severely distorts Wittgenstein’s conception of religious belief. It is possible to make sense of Wittgenstein’s remarks without either having to ascribe an ‘incommensurability’ thesis or a form of relativism to him. Religious grammar can be learnt by the non-believer, but it is ‘irreducible’ – i.e., it cannot be translated into ordinary discourse (or, indeed, into a ‘language of science’) without ‘remainder’. This also implies that standard interpretations of Wittgenstein that attribute fideism or non-cognitivism to him are wide of the mark. Wittgenstein has no wish to do away with religious content and to reduce it to the expression of emotional attitudes. Consequently, he is not an expressivist. Wittgenstein’s reflections on religious belief are ground-breaking precisely because

they cannot be pressed into preconceived moulds. Hence, wouldn't it be odd if a philosopher who otherwise challenged the philosophical orthodoxy, came no further in his reflections on religion than the Logical Positivists?

Notes

- 1 Wittgenstein (1977: 83e) wrote: 'If Christianity is the truth then all the philosophy that is written about it is false.'
- 2 Compare also Hyman (2001) and Schroeder (2007).
- 3 Compare also Schroeder (2007).
- 4 In Schönbaumsfeld (2007) I show that Nielsen's objection misfires (see pp. 191–96).
- 5 It is unclear why Wittgenstein speaks of 'separate' in connection with a discussion of a Last Judgement, but I presume he is thinking of sentences such as 'the soul is separate from the body' or some such thing, but of course this is only a guess. What exactly Wittgenstein meant is irrelevant to our discussion, though.
- 6 For more on this, see the next section.
- 7 Quoted in Monk (1991: 298).
- 8 Father O'Hara was a professor of physics and mathematics at Heythrop College London, who participated in a BBC debate about science and religion in the 1930s.
- 9 'I believe that one of the things Christianity says is that sound doctrines are all useless. That you have to change your *life*. (Or the *direction* of your life.) ... The point is that a sound doctrine need not *take hold* of you; you can follow it as you would a doctor's prescription.—But here you need something to move you and turn you in a new direction ... Once you have been turned round, you must *stay* turned round. Wisdom is passionless. But faith by contrast is what Kierkegaard calls a *passion*' (Wittgenstein 1977: 53e).
- 10 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Occasions*, ed. by James Klagge and Alfred Nordmann (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993), p. 119.
- 11 See *The Book on Adler*, p. 5.
- 12 For more on this point, see Schönbaumsfeld (2007), chapter 4.

6

FUNDAMENTALIST APPROACHES TO RELIGION

Harriet A. Harris

What are fundamentalist approaches to religion?

Fundamentalism and philosophers of religion

Nicholas Wolterstorff answers a charge that those practising ‘philosophical theology within the analytic tradition’ are ‘religious fundamentalists, employing the techniques of philosophy for apologetic purposes without displaying anything of the critical spirit of the true philosopher’ (Wolterstorff 2009b: 156).

The exact charge that Wolterstorff addresses is not clear. Is it that philosophers like him are apologists who know already where they want their arguments to go? If so, this would not be a uniquely fundamentalist trait: philosophers usually are apologists for their beliefs, and know where they want to take their arguments. But the charge contains the accusation that Wolterstorff and others like him fail to test their arguments with sufficient critical scrutiny. This is reminiscent of Tolstoy’s lament that there are very few freethinkers:

Freethinkers are those who are willing to use their minds without prejudice and without fearing to understand things that clash with their own customs, privileges, or beliefs. This state of mind is not common ... A man may be a Catholic, a Frenchman, or a capitalist, and yet be a freethinker; but if he put his Catholicism, his patriotism, or his interest, above his reason, and will not give the latter free play where those subjects are touched, he *is* not a freethinker. His mind is in bondage.

(Tolstoy 1943/1950: xvi)

As Tolstoy suggests, many people, of any religious, philosophical, or ideological persuasion, might lack free-thought in Tolstoy’s sense. But if we use the term ‘fundamentalism’ this broadly, then we will not be as sharp as we might be in attempting to understand particular approaches in religion that have arisen in the last 150 years. Moreover, a number of religious thinkers, philosophers, and ideologues would mount a philosophical case against regarding reason as so independent or neutral a facility. Wolterstorff would have much to say in response to Tolstoy about the ways in which commitments and reason shape one another, and much to say theologically about the nature of freedom and bondage.

A difficulty with many accusations of ‘fundamentalism’ is that they close down rather than open up conversation, and are intended to divert us from giving serious attention to a position. Philosophers of religion might justifiably be termed fundamentalist if they are massaging research findings to make invulnerable that which they, perhaps mistakenly, regard as fundamental to their belief system. But one would be hard-pressed to find Wolterstorff guilty of this. Fundamentalism is by nature strongly foundationalist, and Wolterstorff is wary of strong forms of foundationalism. Or is the charge that Wolterstorff addresses to do with the content of the beliefs held by analytical philosophical theologians, which is usually orthodox and Christian, in some cases Jewish or Muslim, and less commonly from other world faiths? If so, the charge would need detailed substantiation. Holding to orthodox belief within any religious faith would not qualify one as ‘fundamentalist’; fundamentalism is a modern development. Being ‘orthodox’ may even disqualify one from being fundamentalist where ‘orthodoxy’ implies on-going recognition that divine mediations are mediations and should not be elevated to another status (Farley 2005), and that human perspectives, even when they are religious human perspectives, are not to be identified with God’s seeing of the world (Williams 2012: 16).

We could consider other possible meanings of the charge that philosophical theologians, or analytical philosophers of religion, are fundamentalist, but usually such charges of ‘fundamentalism’ are made without a definition of terms, without justifying arguments, and in order to discourage rather than encourage exploration and understanding.

There is a more thoughtful way in which some philosophers of religion accuse other philosophers of religion of being ‘fundamentalist’. Jaco Gericke (2011) suggests that Eleonore Stump, Alvin Plantinga, William Lane Craig, and Richard Swinburne treat scripture in fundamentalist ways in developing their philosophical arguments. He seems to mean, following the characterisations of fundamentalism by James Barr and Harriet Harris, that they read biblical texts in naïvely realist ways, as though biblical narratives give us direct historical reports of events. Gericke is himself both a philosopher and a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, and his historical-critical training in the interpretation of biblical texts causes him to blush at the uses to which philosophical colleagues put the Bible. His sensibility is similar to that of the theologian Maurice Wiles (1987: 48), who said of Richard Swinburne in the 1980s: ‘I do not see how any theologian who has given serious attention to the work done by biblical scholars could begin to pursue the work of Christian theology in the way that Swinburne proposes’.

There is more content to Gericke’s assertion, which concerns usage of scripture, than there is to the charge that Wolterstorff addresses. Yet, it remains an assertion that Gericke has not justified by argument, and one that may not hold up to scrutiny. By the end of this chapter, readers should be in a position to test it, and to use the term ‘fundamentalism’ in ways that enhance, rather than discourage, understanding of particular religious trends.

Sharpening how we speak about fundamentalism

We need ways of speaking about fundamentalism that can capture the breadth of fundamentalist tendencies, but also the specificity of this modern religious phenomenon.

Fundamentalist approaches to religion share features that religions have displayed in diverse ways down the ages. Depending on the particular religious tradition under consideration, these features may include: belief in the plenary verbal inspiration of sacred texts; literalism (a charge that always needs qualifying); apocalyptic expectations; evangelistic or proselytising enthusiasm; militant attitudes or behaviour; a sense of adhering to ‘true’ religion whilst co-religionists are somehow ‘false’; emphases on leaders and authority figures, prescriptive gender roles, and ethnocentric orientation.

All so-called religious ‘fundamentalists’ exhibit some of these traits. All of these traits also exist (not always altogether) in forms of pre- and non-fundamentalist religion. Yet, fundamentalist approaches to religion are distinctively modern. A popular route for explaining why this is so, is to see fundamentalism as a product of shifts of thought that occurred through the Protestant Reformation and subsequent European Enlightenment.

This chapter will indeed come round to exploring fundamentalist approaches to religion through lenses of Protestant-Enlightenment thought. Such exploration uncovers the epistemological anxieties that motivate Protestant fundamentalism, which is the original form of fundamentalism. The term ‘fundamentalist’ was coined amongst Baptists in Boston in 1920, as a rallying cry to those who would battle against theological modernism within their denominations, and who would defend the fundamentals of their faith: ‘We suggest that those who still cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the fundamentals shall be called “Fundamentalists”’... (Laws 1920: 834). The doctrine of biblical inerrancy quickly became the most fundamental belief for fundamentalists, in that it became the foundation upon which all other beliefs were made to rely. As the following quotation from the popular fundamentalist-evangelical philosopher Francis Schaeffer reveals, epistemological anxiety is key to understanding Protestant fundamentalism:

Unless the Bible is without error, not only when it speaks of salvation matters, but also when it speaks of history and the cosmos, we have no foundation for answering questions concerning the existence of the universe and its form and the uniqueness of man. Nor do we have any moral absolutes, or certainty of salvation, and the next generation of Christians will have nothing on which to stand. Our spiritual and physical children will be left with the ground cut out from under them, with no foundation upon which to build their faith or their lives.

(Schaeffer 1984: 46–47)

This stating of the anxiety, and its resolution in an inerrant Bible, serves as well as any definition could, in capturing what is involved in a fundamentalist approach to religion. ‘Fundamentalisms’ within Roman Catholicism and in many of the world faiths have been influenced by Protestant fundamentalist patterns of thought; they may not require inerrant scriptures, but they require some touchstone whose reliability, or purity, is guaranteed as giving un-mediated access to what is divine or true.

We shall focus our philosophical gaze on how Enlightenment philosophies nurtured both the epistemological quandary felt by fundamentalists, and their endeavour to resolve it. But before we proceed, it is important to make three asides.

A broader context

First, we note that a philosophical enquiry that focuses on the epistemological drivers for fundamentalists is a narrow approach. It is a worthwhile approach, for the depth and clarity of understanding that it yields regarding the aspiration to have a fundament for faith. But it is not wholly satisfying for attempts to understand, for example, fundamentalist tendencies towards gender-segregation, or why some fundamentalists are militant and others are not, or why some are apocalyptic in outlook and others are not. Historical and social-scientific enquiry is better equipped to address such questions. The philosophical enquiry that we will pursue concerns the ways in which a fundament of faith is identified and protected, regardless of whether such protectors are militant, or apocalyptic, or controlling of gender-roles.

Even so, we can house this philosophical enquiry within historical and social-scientific theories about religion in the modern world. The theologian Ed Farley employs Peter Berger's account of the disappearance of the 'Sacred Canopy', in offering an insightful account of fundamentalism across religious traditions (Farley 2005).

In Berger's terms, a religious 'sacred canopy' overarched pre-modern cultures; a canopy that has now been removed such that each religion must find a way to survive amidst institutions, world views, and everyday life practices that are utterly emptied of divine import. Farley identifies diverse responses that religions have made to this secularising trend. One response is to become culturally isolated, to repeat traditional formulae and to avoid self-conscious apologetics. Another is to modernise, to de-absolutise traditional forms of authority and use them to criticize and revise traditional religion. Farley sees fundamentalism as a third response.

He describes the fundamentalist response in terms of the mediating entities of religion. All religions have mediating entities that both mediate the sacred power and presence, and deliver the 'traditioned material' to the next generation. These entities include texts, rituals, cosmology, authorities, figures, laws, and ethical teachings. Religions, like any other institutions, have processes of self-preservation that enable them to give human beings what they need and desire, and also to pass down what is important through the generations. Since these processes can fuel exclusivist and violent forms of self-preservation, religions also have within them self-critical modes that radically and prophetically undercut their own institutions, such as the prophetic voices of the Hebrew Bible challenging the priestly tradition. The mediating entities themselves – the scriptures, rituals, structures – contain within them clues for transcending their authority; clues which point to the irreducible holy. The body of Christ is and is not to be identified with the consecrated bread at the Eucharist; the will and acts of God are and are not to be identified with any of the institutions that mediate them.

In fundamentalist forms of religion, Farley argues, the mediations have come to be overly identified with the divine, so that it is problematic to regard them as self-conflicting or in any way fallible. Fundamentalists, depending on their tradition, cannot tolerate the possibility of errancy in scripture, or fallibility in the Papacy, or deviation in whichever mediation they put at the base of their faith.

Farley's theory needs slight modification. Farley holds that when the sacred canopy is removed, then 'religion's mediating foundations (the supernaturally given inerrant Scripture, the infallible church leadership, the unambiguous originating figure) begin to shake'. As regards Western Christianity, it would be more accurate to say that the seeds for belief in the inerrancy of Scripture and the infallibility of the Pope were there, and that when religious foundations seemed to be under threat, the doctrines of inerrancy and infallibility became formalised. This happened within Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism, respectively, in the late nineteenth century.

However, Farley rightly captures the sense of alarm that was, and is, created by challenges to religious authority: 'This shaking of religion's mediating and "divine" foundations can be experienced as a removal of religion's very contents'. We see this in the Protestant fundamentalist fear, as voiced by Francis Schaeffer, that without the sure foundation of an inerrant Bible, the whole faith comes tumbling down, and the future of society is imperilled.

Farley is also right that a sacramental orientation protects against the fundamentalist impulse: 'In its sacramental orientation, religion's content is never simply its mediations but the mysterious activity of the holy itself; the presence and activity of the holy bestow mystery and ambiguity on the mediations. 'But when the secularizing momentum of the modern removes the sacred canopy and imperils the mediations, religion in a self-defensive act can transform the mediations into its very contents'. Then we get a total identification between what God willed

or caused, and the mediations themselves, be they an inerrant Bible, an infallible Papacy, or a fundamentalistically conceived Rabbinate or Sharia Law. The radical and prophetic dimension of religion is suppressed, which would otherwise enable believers to call these mediations in to question.

Farley's is the most insightful general account of religious fundamentalism available. Because it is general, sometimes the case is overstated in relation to particular religious fundamentalisms. For example the claim that, 'Once the mediations themselves become the focus and very content of faith, faith's sense of the limitation, ambiguity, and potential corruption of all finite entities is compromised', does not work for Protestant fundamentalists, who need only their one foundational entity, the Bible in its original autographs, to be uncompromised. Protestant fundamentalists are not traditionalists, and will judge both tradition and church institutions against (their readings of) Scripture. Farley's characterisations need qualifying for any particular fundamentalism under discussion, but they are helpful for conveying the general pattern by which a fundamentalist apologetic takes shape, and which Farley captures succinctly in this paragraph:

To assert an unqualified identity between the holy and something like a cosmology, practice, or text gives rise to tendencies to eliminate from those things history, context, process, perspective, and fallibility. Since its status has become the status of the divine itself, the mediating entity is placed beyond criticism, assessment and open inquiry. Accordingly, the literalist and factual strand always present in ordinary religion develops into a self-conscious and even 'rational' apologetics whose aim is to demonstrate the plain truth of the contents of the mediations.

Fundamentalism, empiricism and atheism

Shortly we shall look in more detail at the development of fundamentalist rational apologetics, but before we do so we might note some parallels with new forms of atheism. Interestingly, Farley regards fundamentalist approaches to religion as akin to atheism, for the ways in which they try to reduce the irreducible, or comprehend the incomprehensible.

New Atheists tend to divide religious believers into two camps: those who are fundamentalist and those who are disingenuous. For example, A.C. Grayling (2013: 6) holds that non-fundamentalist religion is hypocrisy, presumably because it does not make a direct identification between words and the things that the words are said to represent, and does not aim to justify its claims with empirical evidence. Grayling suspects non-fundamentalist religion of hiding behind mystery, and complains that 'explaining something by something unexplained amounts, obviously, to no explanation at all' (Grayling 2013: 77). Along similar lines, Jonathan E. Adler (2007: 272) accuses religious believers of special pleading: 'Exceptionalism is the norm for religious faith', he writes, citing as an example the refusal by religious believers to apply chemical testing to the wine at the Eucharist.

Adler is more insistent than religious fundamentalists that religious claims ought to be empirically tested. Religious fundamentalists do not wish to test for chemical change in consecrated wine. Most Protestant fundamentalists would understand Christ's presence at the Lord's Supper to be spiritual, and not bodily located in the bread and wine, and so they would not expect the physical elements to be in any way changed. Roman Catholic fundamentalists would

accept the sacramental teaching of the Roman Catholic Church that the ‘substance’ of the elements changes while the ‘species’ or appearance remains unchanged, in which case they, too, expect no change of a kind that could be discerned through chemical testing. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that the signs of the bread and wine become, in a way that surpasses understanding, the Body and Blood of Christ. This is the kind of ‘special pleading’ that riles Adler, and the kind of move decried by Grayling, namely explaining something by something unexplained. But then Grayling and Adler become interesting as extreme examples of what it is like to have no time for, and perhaps no capacity for, a sacramental orientation: no sense, for example, that consecrated wine both is and is not the blood of Christ; that it is changed not by human prayer but by divine promise; that chemical testing is irrelevant (similarly irrelevant to testing a piece of paper for chemical change once it has become a note of monetary value according to the promise of the bank); that its being the blood of Christ is neither verifiable nor falsifiable, and this does not render the assertion meaningless. Christ being present in the bread and the wine at the Eucharist is heavy with meaning, and full of implications and practical outworkings, the understanding of which is enhanced by belief that sacraments are visible signs of an invisible grace.

New Atheists are interesting for our purposes in suggesting how religious fundamentalists might think if they lost all sense of how religious language works. Some evangelicals and fundamentalists share Adler’s view that it is worthwhile to run experiments in order to test the efficacy of prayer, such as prayers for those who are sick (Harris 2010: 228–32), and so they forget certain matters that Adler has never understood, including: that God cannot be put to the test, and may not wish to cooperate; that prayer is unquantifiable (in practice and perhaps also in theory); and that prayers for the sick are said continually, and generically, around the world, which complicates attempts to run controlled experiments.

Farley’s point of correction to both religious fundamentalists and the New Atheists is that religion’s causality discourse is only apparently and peculiarly empirical: ‘Almost all of religion’s empirical claims turn out to be convictions about the hidden presence or operation of sacred or divine power in some event, omen, historical figure, or text. ... Nor is the divine causality itself even imaginable. “God created the heavens and the earth” is not on the same plane of discourse as “the cosmos originated with the Big Bang”.’ Religious discourse ‘meshes divine activity and presence into ordinary events and figures’, and therefore it is a sacramental discourse, and ‘it is this sacramental discourse that prevents empirical states of affairs from constituting the very content of religion.’

New Atheists and religious fundamentalists share in common a tendency to interpret religious discourse too empirically. New Atheists thereby attempt to show that religious claims are either empirically wrong, or else unverifiable or unfalsifiable and so meaningless (according to a logical-positivist philosophy). Religious fundamentalists are not quite so positivistic, but they make an over-identification between empirical entities, be they texts, leaders, events, or omens, and that in which they place their faith. Hence, they develop doctrines about these empirical entities that would eliminate error from them. Francis Schaeffer is an exemplar of fundamentalism as Farley describes it, for he fears that unless the Bible is inerrant, Christians have no foundation upon which to build their faith or their lives. Moreover, Schaeffer makes the stakes very high; the Bible must be without error even in matters of history and the cosmos. No people have made the Bible, and by implication their faith, so vulnerable to empirical testing as did the Protestant fundamentalists of the twentieth century.

Fundamentalism and evangelicals

The third aside is crucial for averting potential misunderstandings.

In quoting Francis Schaeffer, we touch on the contentious issue of the relationship between fundamentalism and evangelicals. Schaeffer had a fundamentalist lineage, but most people would regard him as 'evangelical'. He studied and was ordained within militant-separatist-fundamentalist institutions in the 1940s and '50s, but he came to regret their 'harsh and ugly' nature (Schaeffer 1981: 189). He subsequently became a much-loved evangelical philosopher and apologist. Like many evangelicals of his generation, he retained belief in an inerrant Bible, and it is in this respect that he is an exemplar, for our purposes, of fundamentalist approaches to religion, and not in respect of his cultural attitudes, which became irenic and inclusive.

A brief history of how the term 'fundamentalism' developed in American Protestantism will help to guide responsible usage today. As stated above, the name 'fundamentalist' was first used in 1920 amongst Northern Baptists in the United States of America. It was soon adopted by Presbyterians and others in a coalition against liberal theology and Higher Criticism of the Bible. A coalition of diverse evangelicals had been growing since the late nineteenth century, as evidenced in a series of pamphlets called 'The Fundamentals', that were produced in 1909–15, with authors as varied as B.B. Warfield from Princeton, British evangelical biblical scholars, some members of pre-millennialist prophetic conferences, and a few anti-evolutionists. These pamphlets were relatively irenic, but in the 1920s self-proclaimed fundamentalists became militant. Curtis Lee Laws, who had rallied people together under the name 'fundamentalist', soon regretted the schismatic tendencies of fundamentalists within his own and other denominations, notably the Presbyterians, who wished to silence or break away from the modernists. Ironically, Laws himself did not subscribe to the doctrine of biblical inerrancy (that the Bible in its original manuscripts contained no errors, and that any errors we may have in our transcripts have providentially been kept to a minimum), which soon became a hallmark of fundamentalism.

There are Protestant groups who continue to claim the fundamentalist label for themselves. They are mostly in the USA and more in the southern states, although fundamentalism originated in the northern cities of Boston, New York, Chicago and Philadelphia. In the 1920s fundamentalists lost the battle for their denominations and withdrew into newly formed churches and denominations. They came to distinguish themselves from evangelicals by holding to a doctrine of separation: that they must keep themselves separate from worldly activities and attitudes, from non-fundamentalist Christians, and even from anyone who mixes with non-fundamentalist Christians. In the mid- and late-twentieth century, they denounced both Billy Graham and the politicised (neo-) fundamentalists, such as Jerry Falwell, for being 'unequally yoked' with 'unbelievers': Graham for accepting sponsorship from people who are not 'born-again' and 'Bible-believing'; Falwell for working with Catholics, Jews, Mormons, and 'Protestants of every stripe' in forming the lobbying group the Moral Majority (Rasmussen 1966; Jones 1980).

Since the early 1920s there have been evangelicals, particularly in Britain, who have resisted the label 'fundamentalist' because of its unwelcome connotations of militancy, cultural backwardness, and anti-intellectualism. In the USA in the 1940s and '50s, a group calling themselves 'new-evangelicals' rejected the separatism of their fundamentalist forebears. Over time they also came to question particular ways in which the doctrine of inerrancy was defended. Billy Graham was the leading evangelist of the new-evangelicals; Carl F.H. Henry their leading systematician; and Fuller Theological Seminary their flagship institution. However, and to their chagrin, evangelicals are often regarded as fundamentalist, regardless of their level of social or indeed intellectual activity, if they retain a commitment to inerrancy. This is because, insofar as the ideal of an error-free Bible, and all that it implies theologically, is still in their bloodstream, their view of scripture does not differ significantly from that of their fundamentalist cousins, and their apologetics and approach to faith are driven by the same epistemological anxieties.

Debate on this matter is still live; evangelicals feeling that they are held in a Catch-22 situation by critics who regard them as fundamentalist however much they protest or develop; critics holding that biblical fundamentalism is present wherever people are governed by a commitment to inerrancy. The term 'fundamentalism' is applied to evangelical defenders of inerrancy (although 'biblical fundamentalism' would be clearer and more precise in such instances), and by extension to other Christians and members of other faiths, insofar as they share inerrantist or equivalent ways of thinking. Farley's theory is helpful for gauging what equivalent ways of thinking might involve: over-identifying divine mediations (be they scripture, traditions, leaders, institutions etc.) with the divine; regarding these mediations as unlimited by historical process or error; and building upon them a rational apologetic for the faith.

When we use the term 'fundamentalism' and privilege a focus on 'biblical fundamentalism', we are being relatively narrow and specific, and are not commenting upon political or social ethos. Being clear on this matter may save us much confusion. People can be fundamentalist about scripture without being militant or separatist, or sharing other traits that may be properly associated with fundamentalism within more sociologically-oriented studies. Taking a narrow and specific focus, which scrutinises inerrantism and invites comparison with equivalent developments in other religions, is valuable for philosophical and theological study. When philosophers such as Gericke accuse fellow philosophers of being fundamentalist, they are not commenting on their social or political stance, but on their use of scripture and structure of argumentation. By adopting the same relatively narrow focus, we are able to say that Gericke is using the term 'fundamentalism' too broadly. The philosophers whom Gericke names, such as Swinburne and Stump, are not committed to the ideal of an inerrant Bible. They use the Bible as a source of theological propositions with which to furnish their philosophical arguments, and in doing so they read the Bible according to what fundamentalists and evangelicals might call its 'plain sense', or what we might call 'realist' readings (see below). But they do not over-identify scripture with the divine, and they do not suggest that the Christian faith stands or falls according to whether the Bible can be said to contain errors.

Fundamentalist characteristics and Enlightenment philosophies

It is time to explore fundamentalist approaches to religion in more detail. We will do so using Protestant fundamentalism as the classic, because original, form, and by taking what Farley regards as a narrow approach, namely focusing on the philosophical currents at work in the emergence of fundamentalism. This approach will bring into sharper focus both the insightful and the over-stated aspects of Farley's analysis.

We are not here plotting direct lines of influence between Enlightenment philosophies and fundamentalist developments, though direct lines can be drawn, particularly between Princeton scholars and the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid (Marsden 1980; Bozeman 1977; Vander Stelt 1978; Harris 1998). But we are looking for the shaping of thought, or for the development of an ethos to which both fundamentalists and their liberal opponents subscribed. The English philosopher John Locke was arguably a more formative, though less overt, influence than Reid upon the notions of reason, faith, belief, and knowledge that affected the development of religious fundamentalism. It is also important to note that while fundamentalist apologetics were developed in sympathy with aspects of British Enlightenment thought, they were developed in conscious rejection of German Enlightenment, or Kantian, thought. In particular, Reid's realism was regarded as a helpful antidote to Kantian idealism.

Establishing a right to believe

Fundamentalists are children of the Enlightenment in this crucial regard: they accept, in principle, that if they cannot establish that they are justified in their beliefs, then they lack the epistemic right to believe. Nicholas Wolterstorff would be a very unlikely fundamentalist in this respect, for much of his philosophical agenda has been to question the notions of justification, epistemic duty, and epistemic right that have been imbibed in modern thought; notions that he attributes to John Locke (Wolterstorff 1996).

Locke's rendering of the relation of reason to revelation was formative for the later milieu in which fundamentalism developed. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke maintained that 'Whatever GOD hath revealed, is certainly true' (*Essay* IV.xviii.10), even if it is a belief that we would not be entitled to hold according to the unaided use of our reason. However, that God is the source of some supposed revelation is a matter that we must judge according to reason and evidence. Thus, reason, particularly as it is employed in gathering and assessing evidence, gains the upper hand over revelation in Locke's philosophy: 'our Assent can be rationally no higher than the Evidence of its being a Revelation' (*Essay* IV.xvi.14). The tests that Locke thought fitting for revelation were those of miracle and prophecy, because, as shall be discussed below, Locke regarded these as matters of outer rather than inner evidence. The public verifiability of evidence is an important theme to which we shall return. For now our focus is on the prescription that we must test the evidence for a revelation.

Evidence that would count against a purported revelation being really from God would include its contravening 'the certainty of our intuitive knowledge'; in short, Locke wrote, '*Revelation cannot be admitted against the clear Evidence of Reason*' (*Essay* IV.xviii.5).

Reason must be our last Judge and *Guide* in every Thing. I do not mean, that we must consult Reason, and examine whether a Proposition revealed from God can be made out by natural Principles, and if it cannot, that then we may reject it: But consult it we must, and by it examine, whether it be a *Revelation* from God or no: And if *Reason* finds it to be revealed from GOD, *Reason* then declares for it, as much as for any other Truth, and makes it one of her Dictates.

(*Essay* IV.xix.14)

The biblical scholar and proto-fundamentalist, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, accepted the principle, strongly promoted by Locke, that reason must first test whether a purported revelation really is divinely revealed. He wrote an article in 1911 'On Faith and its Psychological Aspects', arguing that faith and knowledge alike 'rest equally on evidence and are equally the product of evidence' (Warfield 1988: 330). The only difference that he acknowledged between faith and knowledge was that knowledge is based on perception and faith on testimony, so that faith involves a greater element of trust. Although faith is a gift from God, Warfield argued, in an encyclopaedia entry on 'Apologetics' in 1908, it 'is yet formally conviction passing into confidence; and ... all forms of conviction must rest on evidence as their ground, and it is not faith but reason which investigates the nature and validity of this ground' (Warfield 1908: 15).

In 1881, Warfield formulated the classic doctrine of inerrancy together with Princeton theologian A.A. Hodge. The notion was growing, and was reflected and furthered by Hodge and Warfield, that in order for revelation to be established as revelation, it need not only be supported by miracle and prophecy, but must be shown to be without error of any kind.

Judging revelation by empirical evidence

Protestant fundamentalists have at their core a conviction that they need to be able to justify the Christian faith, and that justification is possible only if the Bible is without error, and therefore that first justifying the Bible is a necessary prolegomena to faith.

Some Protestant fundamentalists have been content with deductive reasoning to establish that the Bible is without error. They argue along these lines:

Scripture is inspired by God word-for-word
God does not err
Therefore, Scripture cannot err.

This argument relies upon the doctrine of plenary verbal inspiration, according to which a belief that the Bible is the Word of God is equal to the belief that all of the words of the Bible are God's chosen words. In their 1881 article on inerrancy, A.A. Hodge and B.B. Warfield put the deductive argument like this: 'the scriptures not only contain, but ARE THE WORD OF GOD, and hence ... all their elements and all their affirmations are absolutely errorless' (Hodge and Warfield 1881: 237, original emphasis). The British evangelical theologian James I. Packer made the same point the other way around: 'what is the cash-value of saying Scripture "inspires" and "mediates the Word of God", when we have constantly to allow for undetectable possibilities of error on the part of each biblical author?' (Packer 1979: 27). The American Pentecostal systematician Wayne Grudem supports the deductive defence with scriptural citations: 'all the words in the Bible are God's words. ... [T]he Bible clearly teaches that God cannot lie or speak falsely' (2 Sam. 7:28; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18). Therefore, all the words in Scripture are claimed to be completely true and without error in any part (Num. 23:19; Pss. 12:6; 119:89, 96; Prov. 30:5; Matt. 24:35)' (Grudem 1994: 91). In a slightly more cautious tone for the twenty-first century, Daniel J. Treier writes: 'If, confessing Scripture's inspiration, one holds to a fairly direct relation between the Bible and the revealed Word of God, then a viewpoint approximating biblical inerrancy follows as a matter of course. God speaks truly' (Treier 2007: 40).

However, most Protestant fundamentalists have wanted to say not only that we know the Bible to be without error, but that we can show it to be without error. Despite appealing to the deductive argument above, Benjamin Warfield effectively undercut that argument by insisting that inspiration is not the first but the last claim we make about scripture: that first we prove the Scriptures 'authentic, historically credible, generally trustworthy, before we prove them inspired' (Warfield 1948: 210).

Warfield was influenced by the methods of textual-criticism, or 'lower criticism', which were being developed in his lifetime by B.F. Westcott and F.J.A. Hort. Warfield used these methods in order to test the inspiration of the biblical texts. He believed that sound textual criticism was bringing critics close to unearthing the original manuscripts, which, he reasoned, would be inerrant because verbally inspired. This approach committed Warfield to accept in principle that should evidence show the original biblical manuscripts to contain errors, then Scripture is not inspired. In the famed article of 1881, Warfield wrote, along with Hodge, that a 'proved error in Scripture contradicts not only our doctrine [of inerrancy], but the Scripture claims and, therefore, its inspiration in making those claims' (Hodge and Warfield 1881: 245).

Hodge and Warfield's defence of biblical inerrancy put the status of the Bible at stake. At the same time, their formulation of the doctrine was such that no error could in practice be established. Hodge and Warfield (1881: 242) presumed that the existence of any actual errors in the original manuscripts was impossible, and they laid down three criteria against which any alleged error in known manuscripts must be tested:

1. Let the alleged error be proved to have existed in the original autographs;
2. Let the interpretation which occasions the apparent discrepancy be proved to be the 'one which the passage was evidently intended to bear'; and,
3. 'Let it be proved that the true sense of some part of the original autograph is directly and necessarily inconsistent with some certainly known fact of history, or truth of science, or some other statement of Scripture certainly ascertained and interpreted.'

Since these criteria cannot in practice be met, Hodge and Warfield protected the inerrancy of the Bible, at least in its original autographs.

Their legacy has been the development of an industry of fundamentalist Biblical scholarship that debates and defends the error-free nature of the Bible. Fundamentalist writings of the twentieth century are overwhelmingly devoted to arguing away apparent mistakes and inconsistencies in Scripture; their efforts premised on the view that Christians have a right to believe only if Scripture can be shown to be flawless according to criteria that can (in principle, if not in practice) be publicly, objectively, investigated.

An emphasis upon objectivity

Locke was suspicious of any claims to revelation that were private and could not be publicly tested. He was a strong opponent of religious enthusiasm and he distrusted talk of immediate revelation. He did not deny that the Holy Spirit could enlighten people's minds through an immediate intercourse (*Essay* IV.xix.5), but he judged that enthusiasts are not so inspired, but instead suffer from a 'warmed or overweening Brain' (*Essay* IV.xix.7). He accused enthusiasts of irresponsibility, of putting themselves beyond public testing and the dictates of reason: 'If *Reason* must not examine their truth by something extrinsic to the Perswasions themselves; Inspirations and Delusions, Truth and Falsehood will have the same Measure, and will not be possible to be distinguished' (*Essay* IV.xix.14).

The tenor of Locke's attacks on Quakers and others who claimed an inner light or revelation was similar to that taken by early fundamentalists against theological liberals. In the 1920s, the fundamentalists' main case against liberals was that they rooted their faith in the uncertain ground of experience and emotion. The respected Princeton theologian J. Gresham Machen argued on the fundamentalist side that 'liberalism', or 'modernism' – the terms were used interchangeably at the time – was a new, non-Christian religion because it sought to turn faith from an objective publicly verifiable matter into a subjective, private venture verified only by the feelings of the individual (Machen 1923, 1925). Fundamentalists believed that by defending the authority of scripture they were protecting the objective data on which faith rests. Their apologetic developed as one of fact over against feeling, and objective certainty over against subjective opinion. Protestant fundamentalist apologetics have been driven by the conviction that the Bible's teachings are publicly verifiable. The Bible, which is the word of God written, replaces Christ in this crucial respect; that it remains open to our public investigation, 'available for study, for public inspection, for repeated examination, and as a basis for mutual discussion' (Grudem 1994: 50).

Realism

We have alluded to Locke's argument that since inner experience is not a reliable guide, the suitable tests for authenticating a divine revelation are those of miracle and prophecy (where prophecy is understood to be validated by the coming to bear of forecast events). 'To know that

any Revelation is from God', Locke wrote in *A Discourse of Miracles*, 'it is necessary to know that the Messenger that delivers it is sent from God, and that cannot be known but by some credentials given him by God himself' (Locke 2002: 44). He argued that miracles can witness to the messengers' mission from God. He took the biblical accounts of miracles at face-value, in a way that might appear 'fundamentalist' today:

For example, *Jesus of Nazareth* professes himself sent from God: He with a word calms a Tempest at Sea: This one looks on as a Miracle, and consequently cannot but receive his Doctrine: Another thinks this might be the effect of Chance, or Still in the Weather and no Miracle, and so stands out; but afterwards seeing him walk on the Sea, owns that for a Miracle and believes: Which yet upon another has not that force, who suspects it may possible be done by the assistance of a Spirit: But yet the same Person seeing afterwards our Saviour cure an inveterate Palsie by a word, admits that for a Miracle, and becomes a convert. By all which it is plain, that where the Miracle is admitted, the Doctrine cannot be rejected; it comes with the assurance of a Divine Attestation to him that allows the Miracle, and he cannot question its Truth.

(Locke 2002: 46)

While Locke held what we might call a subjective view of miracles, in that the miraculous quality of an event is in the eye of the beholder, he also exhibited a realism of the kind that became particularly cherished within fundamentalist and pre-fundamentalist apologetics. He took the scriptures to be straightforward accounts of real states of affairs in the world. The differences of interpretation that Locke considered, are differences between how witnesses judge events that have seemingly miraculous elements. They are not, for example, differences of opinion about the outward features of the events, or about how the miracle came to be 'reported' (as a direct realist might say) or 'narrated' (as a more literary interpreter might say).

Locke did not question that events unfolded as the biblical texts suggest. His realism, and more substantially that of Thomas Reid, was crucial to the nineteenth- and twentieth-century apologists who developed and sustained the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. Reid's Common Sense Realism, in particular, was regarded as a bulwark against the idealist philosophies that underlay German Higher Criticism, and was drawn upon explicitly to underpin fundamentalist apologetics.

It may seem strange to allude to Locke's realism given that Reid developed his philosophy of Common Sense Realism in reaction against Locke's idealism, that is, Locke's theory of Ideas. Locke's theory, in short, was that the direct objects of our perceptions are not external realities but ideas in the mind which represent these realities in some way. In arriving at this position Locke drew upon Descartes' distinction between primary and secondary qualities of matter. Descartes argued that primary qualities, namely extension and motion, are essential to matter, whereas secondary qualities, such as colour, smell and taste, reside not in the external object as such, but in the mind as it perceives the object (Descartes 1984–91, Vol. I: 88–90, 284–85, Vol. II: 29–31). Locke defined secondary qualities as 'nothing in the objects themselves, but Powers to produce various Sensations in us by their *primary Qualities*' (1689/1979: 135).

Initially, Reid followed Bishop Berkeley's development of the ideal theory. Berkeley saw the potential for scepticism, and sought to avoid any gap between ideas and the real world. He accused Locke of distinguishing (arbitrarily) between qualities which exist materially and qualities which exist only mentally, and brought both primary and secondary qualities into the mind. Berkeley thereby extinguished matter as a substance distinct from ideas, and regarded ideas and the minds perceiving them as the only realities. He defined the real world in terms of ideas and denied the existence of a mind-independent material world (1734/1975: 88).

But despite Berkeley's efforts to close a route for scepticism, he in fact opened up a route that David Hume came fully to exploit. Hume attributed our idea of external existence directly to ideas and impressions rather than to external objects themselves, or at least argued that we cannot know that they are attributable to external entities. He also questioned the notion of minds as substances with continued existence and identity (*Treatise* I ii 6, I iv; *Enquiry* xii). Hume's philosophy drove Lockean empiricism to its most sceptical conclusion. When Reid realized this, he ended his endorsement of the Berkeleian system and criticized the ideal doctrine in its entirety.

Reid posited a direct realism in place of the doctrine of ideas. He defended the common sense belief that we perceive objects rather than ideas of objects, and hence that we perceive the outside world directly. The 'vulgar' are not aware of strange ideal objects in the mind, Reid said. They know of only one object, 'which in perception, is something external that exists; in memory, something that did exist; and in conception, may be something that never existed' (Reid 1863: 369).

On the matter of perception, Reid presented a geometrical argument to defend the claim that visible figure and extension are the signs of tangible figure and extension. According to the ideal theory, the mind knows only some copy of the impression that a tangible object makes on the sense organs. Reid used the example of a right-lined triangle to make the point that a tangible figure is projected on to the bottom of the eye as a spherical triangle, but is seen as the rectilinear triangle that it is (1863: 148). If we knew only copies of impressions, he argued, we would have developed a spherical rather than Euclidean geometry to match these spherical perceptions.

For biblical apologists, it was Reid's extension of his perceptual realism to arguments about memory and testimony that became most important. Reid argued that just as perception puts us directly in touch with external objects, rather than with ideas, so memory puts us in relation with the object remembered rather than with our idea of that object. Thereby, our memory reliably informs us about past events in our own experience. Like perception, memory is an unanalysable 'original faculty, given us by the Author of our being' (1863: 340). While we can find no necessary connection between remembering an act and the act having happened, and can say only that the belief which we have of what we remember 'is the result of our constitution', Reid asserted that our inability to explain the operation of memory does not affect our belief that it yields 'knowledge ... of things past' (1863: 341). Memory is an original faculty which inexplicably yields immediate knowledge of things remembered.

Similarly, Reid held that, with certain qualifications, testimony can be trusted to tell us of actual events in the experience of others and not simply of the reporter's point of view. He believed that language corresponds to states of affairs external to the mind and thereby puts us in touch with reality. He explained his faith in human testimony by means of two principles that he regarded as implanted in our natures by the Author of our Being, who intended that 'we should receive the greatest and most important part of our knowledge by the information of others' (1863: 196). The first of these principles is a propensity to speak truth, which is there even in a lie because it is a yielding to a natural impulse. The second is the principle of credulity – of believing what one is told – which is unlimited until one encounters instances of deceit (1863: 196–97). Reid held that the major difference between human testimony and the testimony of the senses (perception) is that as we get older 'the credit given to human testimony is restrained and weakened, by the experience we have of deceit', while the credit we give to our senses is confirmed by the uniformity and constancy of the laws of nature (1863: 184).

Acknowledging Reid's principle of credulity, Dugald Stewart (1814: 235–36, 239–40), a colleague in the Common Sense school, asserted that if our instinct to trust testimony is

regulated by lessons of experience, testimony can yield certain knowledge. Although ‘philosophers are accustomed to speak of the event as only *probable*; ... our confidence in its happening is not less complete, than if it rested on the basis of mathematical demonstration’ (Stewart 1814: 240). We can see how this confidence, so distant from the scepticism of Hume, could be put to service in defending the notion that biblical testimony can yield certainty.

Biblical apologetics

Reid offered no philosophical consideration of biblical authority in his major works. He gave greater consideration to natural than to revealed religion, and had less to say about Scripture than did Locke. However, in his lectures on natural theology delivered in 1780 (edited from student notes and published in 1981), Reid took essentially the same line as Locke; that to be justified in accepting the Scriptures as Revelation one must use reason to establish that they come from God:

It is no doubt true that Revelation exhibits all the truths of Natural Religion, but it is no less true that reason must be employed to judge of that revelation; whether it comes from God. Both are great lights and we ought not to put out the one in order to use the other. ... We acknowledge then that men are indebted to revelation in the matter of Natural Religion but this is no reason why we should not also use our reason here. ... Tis by reason that we must judge whether that Revelation be really so. ... [T]hat man is best prepared for the study and practice of the revealed Religion who has previously acquired just Sentiments of the Natural.

(Reid 1981: 1–2)

James Beattie also shared the Lockean position that reason should acquiesce to the mysteries of religion, but that evidences make such acquiescence possible. He was the only member of the Scottish Common Sense school to offer an apologetic for the Bible, which he gave in his *Evidences of the Christian Religion*. (James Oswald offered a simplistic apologetic for natural religion, which brought the Common Sense school into disrepute.) Beattie’s aim was to defend the Gospel history as true. His efforts read like a precursor to fundamentalist biblical apologetics, particularly in his application of realist principles. For example, he defended the unbiased nature of the apostles’ testimony: ‘all is fair, candid, and simple: the historians make no reflections of their own, but confine themselves to matter of fact, that is, to what they heard and saw’ (Beattie 1786, I: 89), and he accepted their reports of miracles and prophecies as ‘facts, in regard to which they could not be mistaken, though they had been the most credulous of mankind’ (I: 164–65).

Beattie’s method was principally to maintain the reliability of human testimony and the trustworthiness of the apostles. He argued that discrepancies between the gospels exist only insofar as the writers ‘could not have stood all in the same place, nor consequently taken notice of the very same particulars without variation’ (Beattie 1786, II: 100), and some inaccuracies may have entered through transcribers (II: 83–84). But, Beattie claims, supposed ‘obscurities’ have been ‘both multiplied and magnified far beyond the truth’ (II: 82). He judges it ‘the intention of Providence that we shall have difficulties to encounter’, but denies that these pose considerable difficulties for the religion of the New Testament. When ‘fairly stated, they will be found rather to add to its evidence’ (II: 88, 90). He insists that the Christian faith is rational, but that it may not appear to be so to those who take reason beyond the true limits of philosophy and attempt to explain that to which reason should simply assent. Beattie’s views on reason and evidences, and his appeal to the evangelists as reliable eye-witnesses, backed by

harmonisations of the gospel records and a defence of their general consistency, all find their parallels in fundamentalist apologetics. However, attempts to provide detailed evidence of inerrancy came after Beattie's time.

Inerrancy and facticity

The idea that scripture 'evidence[d] itself to be the Word of God' (the Westminster Confession, I, v) was not new, and of course not created by eighteenth-century philosophies. However, evidences had previously been regarded as supportive of, rather than foundational to, claims to the Bible's truth and authority. Under the influence of Lockean empiricism, the weight was shifting. Locke's own tests for the authenticity of a divine revelation turned on the message being supported by miracle or prophecy, and it not offending our intuitively held certainties. By the turn of the twentieth century, Warfield was arguing that we must first prove the Scriptures to be authentic, historically credible and generally trustworthy, before we prove them to be inspired. Warfield's fundamentalist descendants have largely accepted this onus of proof, and seen it as their duty to defend the inerrancy of Scripture in order to establish its divine origins, and that in order to uphold the truth of the Christian faith.

We also find in Locke and in the Scottish Common Sense philosophers a realism that would come to lend confidence to the fundamentalists of the twentieth century. Neither Locke nor Reid themselves came close to holding a fundamentalist form of Christianity. Far from it, Locke was suspected of harbouring Unitarian and Socinian views, and Reid remained Moderate rather than Evangelical in his Presbyterianism. But the appeal of Common Sense Realism in particular was that it could be used to support the conviction that the biblical records inform us not of ideas or interpretations of events, but of events themselves. This felt deeply important to biblical conservatives at the turn of the twentieth century, who were concerned about the German Idealist influence behind higher-criticism; an influence that named Kant and Hegel in its ancestry, and that eroded confidence in the factual nature of the biblical reports.

The empiricist, objectivist, and realist elements that we have so far attributed to a fundamentalist outlook, are deeply apparent in the fundamentalist emphasis upon facts. J. Gresham Machen, the most intellectual apologist for the fundamentalist cause in the 1920s and '30s, and, like Hodge and Warfield, a professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, argued that the 'Bible is quite useless unless it is a record of facts' (Machen 1936: 65). Machen's philosophical differences with modernists became intensely relevant in debates over the nature of Jesus' resurrection. Machen decried the modernist concern with 'the belief of the disciples in the resurrection' which refused to deal with 'whether the events really took place' (Machen 1926, quoted in Marsden 1980: 216–17). He insisted that the biblical narratives are factual accounts of real events from the past. A number of commentators, including H.L. Mencken, who was a forceful critic of fundamentalism, thought that Machen had the stronger arguments, and that his liberal critics did not address his concerns satisfactorily.

Machen was a scholar who was embarrassed by others in the 1920s and 1930s who shared the fundamentalist label, including those involved in anti-evolutionist crusades and pre-millennialist speculation. Realist readings of the Bible need not take one down the path of reading creation narratives or prophetic passages factually. Protestant fundamentalists tend to read the Bible factually wherever possible, but not where a factual reading would be thought to contradict other accepted facts, as this would undermine belief that the Bible is inerrant. Fundamentalists would not resist evolution if they thought that the factual evidence lay overwhelmingly in favour of evolution; they would not pitch the Bible against what they take to be fact (although they use the Bible to shape what they take to be fact), for that would directly jeopardise their belief in

inerrancy. Arguments against evolution since the 1960s have developed not as a Bible v. Science debate, but in the form of creation science, that is, in the form of appeals to empirical fact. Not all fundamentalists are creation scientists; belief in an inerrant Bible does not necessarily entail reading creation accounts factually.

Nevertheless, reading the Bible in an over-factual way (which is a more accurate phrase than ‘reading the Bible literally’) is a characteristic of fundamentalist apologetics. The new-evangelical theologian Harold Lindsell provides a clear example of an over-factual reading when he argued that Peter must have denied Jesus six times (Lindsell 1976: 175–76). Lindsell could not otherwise make sense of the Gospels’ contrasting accounts of Peter’s denials.

Summarising remarks

This chapter has examined fundamentalism within one diverse religious tradition, namely Protestant Christianity. This tradition is where ‘fundamentalism’ first acquired its name, and where religious fundamentalism has developed most self-consciously and self-critically. Protestant fundamentalism is infused theologically with Reformed emphases on *sola Scriptura*, and philosophically with empirical-rationalist attitudes about epistemic duties and justified belief. A shorthand way of capturing the shape of Protestant fundamentalist belief is to see it as strongly foundationalist: as positing a belief at the base of its system, which must be an immediate, certain, self-justifying belief, and from which all other beliefs can be derived. Protestant fundamentalists place the Bible at the foundation of their belief system and hence treat it almost as an unmediated entity; one that has been directly communicated by God, is self-justifying, can be plainly understood, and needs little if any interpretation (or mediation). It is a tension, then, for Protestant fundamentalists, that they also seek to justify placing the Bible at the fundament of their beliefs, by means of empirical investigation.

Returning to Farley’s theory, we can view the doctrine of inerrancy as an example of a fundamentalist development in which a mediation (in this case, the Bible) is over-identified with the divine, and therefore regarded as free from all error, limitation, or historical conditioning. Biblical fundamentalists would not wholly recognise themselves in Farley’s account, for they do acknowledge to some extent the historical nature of the Bible, and they are careful to reject theories of inspiration that suggest mechanical dictation. They speak about the personalities of the individual authors. However, that God inspires the Scriptures word for word is important to fundamentalists because God guarantees not only that the Scriptures are reliable for our edification and salvation, but also that the human authors got all their facts right. That the facts are right, and hence the Scriptures inerrant, then becomes the primary evidence for God’s inspiration, and in this way the biblical apologetic is circular.

The analysis within this chapter hopefully dampens enthusiasm for using the label ‘fundamentalist’ too readily of philosophers on the grounds that they give realist readings of scripture, or that they allow religious beliefs to influence the ways in which they philosophise. Fundamentalism is a modern religious phenomenon that can be analysed quite specifically, and which can shed light on larger theological and philosophical trends of the modern era, particularly in relation to epistemological anxiety. If we understand fundamentalism as it has developed historically and philosophically, we can use a study of it to assess the effects of foundationalism and empiricism upon religious belief. We can also identify fundamentalist characteristics, such as a strong empiricism or emphases upon facticity, which we see mirrored in New Atheism, and address them from diverse vantage-points of practice, faith, and philosophy.

Part II

Conceptions of divinity

COSMOLOGY, DIVINITY AND SELF-CULTIVATION IN CHINESE THOUGHT

Karyn L. Lai

This chapter aims to articulate some salient characteristics of religious belief in Chinese thought, with particular focus on its indigenous philosophical traditions, Confucianism and Daoism. The historical period covered here spans roughly from the Shang dynasty (17th–11th centuries BCE) to the Han (206 BCE–220 CE). There is substantial archaeological evidence from around the late Neolithic (pre-2000 BCE) and the Shang, allowing scholars to envisage plausible pictures of life, society, and religion at that time. At the other end, while the continuing evolution of religion in China becomes exponentially more interesting and complex after the introduction of Buddhism into China at around the second century CE, the focus on the selected period is critical. First, Confucian and Daoist philosophy, among others, arose and were consolidated as separate traditions during the Han. Secondly, a more thorough awareness of developments in this period enables a more sophisticated understanding of the continuing evolution of religious beliefs and practices through time, including the reception of Buddhism by the Chinese.

Two other related considerations shape this discussion. First, relatively recently-discovered texts, including especially those from a late fourth century BCE tomb in Guodian (in present-day Hubei), were unearthed in 1993. The texts, entitled the *Guodian Chu Jian*, contain elements that challenge entrenched views about the clear delineation of the Confucian and Daoist traditions. This distinction by Sima Qian (145?–86 BCE) in the *Historical Records (Shiji)* involved the categorisation of the debates prior to this period into six ‘schools’ (*jia*), including Confucianism and Daoism, in the discourse available then. Some scholars who had held his classification suspect draw on the Guodian texts to suggest that ‘there was no strong tension between Confucianism and Daoism in pre-Han China’ (Defoort 2000: 3) (see also the issues of *Contemporary Chinese Thought*, vols. 1 & 2, 2000–2001, which are dedicated to the Guodian texts). What this means for the discussion here is that, while it maintains that certain texts and themes are distinctly Confucian, or distinctly Daoist, it will also focus on religious elements which may not belong to either tradition.

Secondly, the discussion will highlight areas in ancient Chinese religion that have recently received significant attention in the literature, those of the Shang period and earlier. A combination of reasons – newly excavated burial sites, cross-disciplinary (philological, philosophical, anthropological and archaeological) approaches, and comparative, multi-regional archaeological studies – have made a major impact on our understanding of ancient Chinese religion. Some of

its features, which predate the demarcation of Confucianism and Daoism, will influence our understanding of divinity and spirituality in the traditions.

This chapter is organised in two sections, Divination and Cosmology. The section titles are not intended as comprehensive and overarching themes but, rather, as entry points into a range of related sub-topics within each area of focus. Investigation of these focal areas will facilitate a sense of the religious landscape over time. Through the focus on divination, we will gain insights into the types of *activities*, as well as the thinking behind them, that sought to access the world of spirits (*shen*) and ancestor powers. A contrastive religious outlook to this may assume, for example, that communication with spirits is redundant since humans have, in themselves, capacities for accessing the divine. In this scenario, the spirit as middleman drops out as irrelevant, as do the divination practices that attempt to communicate with them. This competing view is also significant in certain Chinese philosophical traditions, as we will see later. Secondly, the investigation of cosmology in Chinese thought deals with the nature of religious *belief* and its epistemology. Belief in an integrated and comprehensive cosmological framework included belief in Heaven (*tian*) and its patterns, Earth (*di*) and its landscape, humanity, spirits, natural phenomena, the myriad things (*wanwu*), and the relationships between beings and across domains. The two sections, Divination and Cosmology, facilitate clarity of exposition only, and we must expect overlaps across them.

Divination – securing the future

The term ‘divination’ covers a broad range of practices, participants and underlying metaphysical assumptions. Across time and regions, the term may apply to: (a) prognostication by royal diviners and early kings; (b) appeasement of ancestor spirits, nature powers, and cosmic forces; (c) interpretation, by court officials, of natural and human events in order to legitimise the bureaucracy; (d) the practices of technical experts, including in the mantic arts, so that they can act as conduits for communication between the living and the dead; and (e) prognostications by ordinary people on their fate and personal well-being. An underlying theme in this section is the changing relationship between the human and the divine through time.

Oracle bones and pyromantic practices

Archaeological evidence from the Shang has been, and continues to be, primarily excavated from Yinxu (in a region near Anyang in Henan). The excavation finds include: royal tombs and palaces, including: shrine areas; chariot pits, sacrificial and ash pits, and house foundations; ritual, funerary and burial vessels and jade accessories; and inscribed oracle bones – bovine scapula (*shou jiagu*) – and turtle plastrons (*gui fu jia*). Oracle bones and turtle plastrons were used by the Kings and their diviners during this period, in attempts to prognosticate on a vast range of topics, including natural disasters, harvests, sickness, seasonal and climatic changes, military strategy, sorties and trips, and childbearing (Keightley 1978: 33–35).

More recent finds, beginning from around the 1930s, have contributed to scholarship in the field. For example, cross-disciplinary approaches involving palaeontology, anthropology, and textual analysis have helped correct the misconception that the earliest three dynasties had a narrowly linear succession: Xia (c. 2200–1760 BCE) – Shang – Zhou (c. 1122–221 BCE). The outdated linear model was one dominated by a focus primarily on textual study, and influenced by Sima Qian’s *Historical Records* (Eno 2009: 43; Allan 1984). Archaeological research also demonstrates variation, as well as significant patterns, in multiregional comparisons of divination practices, though these are too complex to discuss here (see, e.g., Flad 2008).

Evidence from the Shang shows that, over time, there was increasing systematisation of divination, where the level of elaboration and systematisation are correlated with the place of ritual in the maintenance of socio-political power (ibid. 19–31). During the Shang,

prognostication questions were posed as ‘charges’ (*ming ci*) in the act of divination. David Keightley reconstructs a divination event:

A topic was addressed to the turtle shell or bone in the form of a charge, which was frequently couched in either alternative (A or B) or in positive and negative (A or not-A) modes. Thus, an initial inquiry about millet harvest might be divided into the two contrasting charges, ‘We will receive millet harvest’ ... and ‘We may not receive millet harvest’ ... The charges were thus tentative predictions or statements of intent, proclaimed to the spirits for their approval or disapproval ... As the charge was addressed to the shell or bone, a hot bronze poker or some other heat source was applied to a series of hollows or pits that had already been bored and chiselled into its back; the heat caused T-shaped stress cracks to form, with up to ten cracks being made in ten separate hollows for each question. Having been numbered ... and examined, the cracks, and thus the charges with which they were associated, were interpreted, if possible, as lucky or unlucky to a greater or lesser degree ... ‘The king, reading the cracks, said: “Auspicious. We will, in this case, receive harvest.”’

(Keightley 1988: 367–68; citing Guo 1978–82: 9950b)

Some records of these activities present a full list of the proceedings, including the verification of the prognostication following its confirmation by future events. The texts from the period of Wu Ding’s reign (c. 1200–1181 BCE; the 21st king of Shang and the earliest in records) include both prognostication and verification, but there is no case where the king’s incorrect forecasts were explicitly noted (Keightley 1988: 372). Keightley suggests that they reveal not only the processes of divination but, as records, had a legitimising role – ‘a primitive form of legitimating historiography’ – that spoke to the ‘passive infallibility’ of the royal diviner (Keightley 1988: 373). Indeed, it seems that some of the charges were recorded in a way as if the intention was to play down the negative outcome (Keightley 1984: 15–16). In some other cases, the charges were phrased as if the diviners sought, magically, to secure the future. In these cases, *only* the positive charge was recorded, such as ‘this night there will be no disaster’ (Keightley 1988: 372). Keightley suggests that these single, positive, charges were no less than ‘ritual incantations with a strong magical element’ (ibid.).

Ancestor spirits, former lords, powers and Di

During the Shang, there was a complicated panoply of spirits and powers invoked in divination. The nature of each of the spirits and powers, and their place in the rituals in the life of the Shang royal house, are closely connected with particular initiatives of the kings and diviners, and also with the role of religion in the maintenance of the Shang State. Dong Zuobin’s classification of Shang inscriptions into five periods continues to be used in scholarship (1945: 1.2b–4b). Drawing in part from Dong’s schema, David Keightley (2004: 5–11) proposes a generally accepted classification of the Shang spirits and powers in six categories:

Table 7.1

(1) <i>Di</i> , the High God	(4) Predynastic ancestors
(2) Nature Powers, e.g. the River Power	(5) Dynastic ancestors
(3) (Spirits of) Former Lords, now associated with the dynasty	(6) Dynastic ancestresses, heir-bearing consorts of kings of mainline descent

In Keightley’s first column, *Di*, the nature powers, and the former lords, were associated with grander-scale events involving the country or dynasty, such as the weather and warfare. *Di* sits

at the apex of this panoply of spirits and powers, indicative of a ‘proto-bureaucratic hierarchy’ (Eno 2009: 70–77, esp. 71). The powers in the second column comprise spirit beings specific to the royal lineage. Paradoxically, while *Di* is in one sense the most powerful in this ordering, as it can directly influence natural phenomena, it was the pre-dynastic and dynastic ancestors, as well as ancestresses, who were invoked in relation to the king’s personal matters through divination rituals. For example, the sounds made by the cracks were interpreted as the speech of the ancestors (Keightley 2004: 7). Some inscriptions belonging to Wu Ding’s time attest to the closeness of the personal relationship between the king and his ancestors: some inscription records suggest that a pledge is offered, should the outcome be successful (ibid. 9). Such evidence of attempts to bargain with the ancestors indicate both a particular closeness with the ancestors, as well as the attempt to mitigate uncertainty (Allan 1991: 57–73). It is worth keeping in mind that these six categories are fluid and some nature powers were attributed the status of ancestors (Keightley 2004: 6–7) or animated as ‘personified spirits’ (Eno 2009: 64; 67–68).

There was meticulous attention to the detail of ritual; for example, some of the nature powers and former lords were, together with ancestors, given ancestral titles and temple names (*gan*) and included in a regular ritual schedule, known as the *gan zhi* (stem and branches) calendrical cycle (Keightley 2004: Fig 1., pp. 13–14; 16–20). In the Zhou, there were detailed prescriptions, including the types of gifts to be exchanged and the seating arrangements at funeral performances that were determined by the rank of a person’s founder-ancestor, and by the nature of their relationship (Cook 2009: 244). Kinship was emphasised through extended mourning periods and lengthy sacrifices, a particular feature of Zhou mortuary practices. Many bronze inscriptions of the Western Zhou (c. 1045–771 BCE) include the formula ‘may sons of sons, grandsons of grandsons, forever treasure and use [this sacrificial vessel]’ (cited in Kern 2009: 154). This was an expression of the belief in, or wish for, eternity.

Nevertheless, in time, there was an increasing tendency to impersonalise the dead ancestors, and this is largely due to the incorporation of ritual in the bureaucratic domain (Keightley 2004: 26–30). This meant, among other things, that the ‘good order represented by the ancestors’ was more important than their individual personalities (ibid. 27). For example, a passage from the Zhou text *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*) proclaims, ‘If you, the myriads of the people, do not attend to [my commands] ... the former rulers will send down on you great punishment for your crime ... Our former rulers will restrain your ancestors and fathers, (so that) your ancestors and fathers will reject you, and not save you from death ...’ (cited in Keightley 2004: 35). Here, Keightley argues, ‘the dead have virtually become coercive police officers in the service of the living king ... although these dead have jural power, they have no individual personality’. Other factors contributed to the diminishing belief in and practice of ancestor worship over the Zhou, including the destruction of aristocratic lineages, the loss of traditional communities, the establishment of more sophisticated agricultural and trade networks, and the rise of political power representing non-Zhou culture (Cook 2009: 237–38). It was against this setting that Confucius (551–479 BCE) and his followers sought to preserve the rituals, practices, texts, and patterns of the past. The Confucians were known collectively as the Literati (*Ru*), as they argued that the restoration of Heaven’s *telos* (or Heaven’s ordinances) was to be achieved through the ethical and cultural achievements of humankind in cooperation with Heaven and Earth. We will return to this in a subsequent section.

Diviners and technical experts

Divination rituals were a major preoccupation of the life of the king and his court; significant resources were devoted to them, including the manufacture and use of ritual vessels, the training

required for the liturgists and engravers, as well as the animal and human sacrifices made during the events (Keightley 2004: 29–30). It has been proposed that the king-diviners were shamans – men of magic (Chen 1936; Chang 1983: 44–55). However, these claims have been heavily scrutinised in the literature for a number of reasons, including: (i) the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’ are not sufficiently well-defined, and this affects the effectiveness of sociological comparisons (von Falkenhausen 1995); (ii) the shamanic model often used in analyses of early China is inappropriate as it derives from Siberian shamanism (Keightley 1998); (iii) the terms of reference – what counts as shamanic – depend to a large degree on matters of definition (Keightley 1999: 262); and (iv) the bulk of data for shamanism in early China dates from the Zhou period and superimposing this data on the late Shang is unwarranted (Boileau 2002).

In the Zhou period, technical experts (*fangshi*) were involved in divination and its associated activities: auguring auspicious days, exorcism, and interpretation of omens. Texts associated with these activities ‘provide concrete methods for the practical management of fate,’ including detailed instructions for rituals to ward off evil, and the appointment of mantic personnel (Raphals 2010: 127). These texts include versions of the *Changes of Zhou* (*Zhouyi*), almanacs, prognostication records, astrocalendric texts, and especially ‘daybooks’ (*rishu*) (Raphals, *ibid.*; see also the detailed discussion of daybooks, excavated in 1992 in Hubei, by Harkness 2011). Raphals suggests that there was much competition between the technical experts and the court officials associated with the Masters texts (the extant texts associated with a ‘master’ such as *Xunzi* and *Zhuangzi*), as both were vying for similar goods: ‘career choice, patronage, students, and the status of modes of knowledge’ (*ibid.* 124). For example *Xunzi*, a Confucian thinker of the Warring States period (475–221 BCE), explicitly argued against superstitious beliefs and practices, describing them as a preoccupation of the simple folk:

If you pray for rain and there is rain, what of that? I say there is no special relationship – as when you do not pray for rain and there is rain. When the sun and moon are eclipsed, we attempt to save them; when Heaven sends drought, we pray for rain; and before we decide any important undertaking, we divine with bone and milfoil. We do these things not because we believe that such ceremonies will produce the results we seek, but because we want to embellish such occasions with ceremony. Thus, the gentleman considers such ceremonies as embellishments, but the Hundred Clans consider them supernatural. To consider them embellishments is fortunate; to consider them supernatural is unfortunate.

(*Xunzi* 17.11; *trans. Knoblock* 1994: 19)

In his close examination of a number of Warring States texts, Michael Puett (2002: 80–121; 145–200) contends that they collectively express disdain for the *fangshi* and their technical arts (*wushu*), some of whom had considerable power in the courts during this period. On this view, the texts propose that, by cultivating the self through proper practices, individuals could attain divine powers and therefore circumvent the need for both divination and *fangshi*. According to Puett, a monistic cosmology underlies these approaches to self-cultivation; these will be explored in the Cosmology section.

Disapproval of *fangshi* and their activities waxed and waned across periods. The Qin (221–206 BCE) emperor Qin Shihuang (259–210 BCE) and the Han emperor Han Wudi (r. 140–87 BCE) were enthused in their quest for immortality and sought immortals and others who could offer them elixirs (Poo 1998: 157–65). The Qin emperor called himself *Huang Di* (Brilliant Di) and consulted *fangshi* who were asked to summon spirits and had ‘theomorphic pretensions’ (Puett 2002: 238–45, at 240). While Wudi was himself keen to employ *fangshi*, he was wary of the

activities of the *fangshi* among the ordinary people (Lin 2009: 451–52). There is also a record of a Han emperor, Cao Cao (155–220), who consulted with *fangshi* that ‘sometimes drank urine and sometimes suspended themselves upside down’ (*Book of the Later Han*, ‘Biographies of Ten Princes of Guangwu’; in DeWoskin 1983: 87).

Ridicule of *fangshi* and hostility toward their activities continued in the second century CE when Buddhism entered China, as they then had to compete with both Buddhist and Daoist monks and nuns (Lin 2010: 276). Then, again, across the early medieval period in China – around the period of the Six Dynasties (220–589) and after – there is evidence of increased consultation of *fangshi* by emperors and court officials. They were called upon to summon ghosts, communicate with gods, conduct exorcisms, advise on taboos, prophesy on a range of matters including military advances and court affairs, cast curses, and conduct black magic (Lin 2010). Some emperors and senior officials created positions for the *fangshi* in the bureaucracy, and others granted titles and built temples in their honour.

Religion, ritual and politics

Variations in the oracle bone inscriptions over time reveal that, by the time of the last two kings of the Shang, Di Yi (r. c. 1101–1076 BCE) and Di Xin (r. c. 1075–1046 BCE), divination practices had become more systematic and structured (Keightley 1999). Keightley (1988: 387) suggests that the metaphysical assumptions underlying divination practices changed in order to be more ‘serviceable politically’; the bi-polar charges of Wu Ding’s time, expressive of openness to *yin-yang* complementarity, eventually gave way to more incantatory and ritualised divination. By the time of Di Yi and Di Xin, a ‘Yijing-style’ divination (associated with the *Book of Changes*) reduced the prognosticatory elements of divination and increased human control through its greater interpretive focus (Keightley 1988: 385–88). These changes may also have been due in part to the relative popularity of turtle-shell and oracle-bone divination among other forms such as milfoil divination associated with the *Book of Changes* (Chang 1981; Eno 2009: 81–85; 89–91).

The evidence demonstrates an overall increasing bureaucratisation of religion in the consolidation of State power in the late Shang and after. Many ancient Chinese myths were employed to legitimise a particular ruler, sage king, or dynasty. Texts from the Zhou assert the divinity of its founder sage kings, Yao, Shun, and Yu, while Han texts gathered the founder deities of the three earliest dynasties, Xia, Shang, and Zhou, into a group known as the *Sanhuang* (three brilliancies); sage kings were assembled in a group known as *Wudi* (five emperors) (Cook 2009: 239). In the *Historical Records*, some of the sage kings and dynastic founders were sired by powerful spirits, mythical creatures such as dragons, or forces of nature, and born of a human mother. This ‘magical paternity’ meant that they were of semi-divine origin (ibid. 554–55) and therefore capable of creating initiatives and institutions necessary for human civilisation.

The Confucian focus on the heightened role of the sage king to establish social order through ritual and tradition was instigated in part by the chaos of the Eastern Zhou during Confucius’ lifetime and after. Confucius appeals to the former glory of the Zhou house during the Western Zhou, as he frequently recalls the Duke of Zhou (r. c. 1043–1036 BCE; e.g. *Analects* (*Lunyu*) 7.5) and the texts of that time (e.g. the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*); *Analects* 2.15; 3.8; 17.9). There is evidence of the gravity of ritual in the Western Zhou; Martin Kern (2009: 153–54) draws on Zhou odes in the *Book of Songs* (*Shijing*) to depict an aesthetic convergence of the visual, auditory, olfactory, and rhythmical aspects of music, dance, linguistic diction, and comportment. The rituals in ancestor worship were instrumental in sustaining the officials both at a personal level and for reasons of State. These included: (a) provision of a space for interaction between the living and the dead; (b) perpetuation of identity and purpose for the living; (c) reinforcement and

continuity of patterns of cultural practices; (d) enforcement of social hierarchy and solidarity; (e) delineation of sacred space and time; (f) expression of the promise that the past would continue into an everlasting future; and (g) establishment of the connection to other ritual, social and political activities such as the celebration of administrative appointments. Kern suggests that the formalisation of ritual was a result of the need for an imagined legitimisation of the beginnings of the dynasty, and to commemorate it so as to further legitimise its continuation (ibid. 150).

As we have suggested here, rituals had overlapping functions for court officials. To some extent, they would have practised some of these rituals in their personal domestic contexts as well, thus further blurring the distinctions between the religious practices at court and in the lives of the ordinary people (Harper 1999: 831–32). Mu-chou Poo (1998: 5) makes a more substantive claim, which is that there is no simple distinction between elite and popular religious culture and ‘it is possible to approach the beliefs of the commoners by examining the culture of the elite’. While Poo’s investigation of popular religion in China is an invaluable resource, there are questions about his work, amongst them the clarity of the distinctions he uses in categorising ‘elite’ and ‘popular’ religion (Brindley 2003; von Falkenhausen 1999). In the following section, we consider folk religious practices and their underlying beliefs.

Divination in ordinary life

The understanding of popular religion in ancient China has been enhanced by the discovery of texts more closely associated with the religious beliefs and practices of the ordinary people than the literature discussed so far. These include mantic texts, astro-calendrical texts, such as the *Xingde* texts from Mawangdui, as well as daybooks, and records of personal prognostication (Kalinowski 1998–99; Raphals 2010). The earliest personal prognostication records date from approximately 340 BCE (ibid. 128). These records reveal the divination attempts of the common people to portend and improve their person’s welfare. In one example, the prognostication concerns illness, including a wish that it be non life-threatening and an attempt to mitigate the severity of the illness by sacrificial offering:

There is an illness near the abdomen with shortness of breath; may there be no calamity ... He made offerings: one billy goat to the Lord of the Wild Lands, one billy goat to the Lord of the Grave ... He prognosticated about it: it is auspicious. In the month *xingyi* he [Shao Tuo] will have an audience with the king.

(Baoshan slips, 207–8, cited in Raphals 2010: 128; from Cook 2006: 168–69)

During the Warring States, there were different ways to prognosticate or pacify spirits, using different kinds of equipment, such as TLV mirrors (bronze mirrors with inscriptions bearing the shapes of the English letters ‘T’ ‘L’ or ‘V’), *liubo* boards (a game of chance used in divination or fortune telling), cosmic charts and divining boards (Lewis 2006a: 273–84; Loewe 1985). Numerology was also used. For example, number sequences were linked with omens in one version of the *Book of Changes*, the *Guicang Yi* text (Raphals 2010: 129–31). In the version from Fuyang, numbers were used to represent hexagram lines (ibid.). More complex number-mapping involved grouping phenomena under numeric headings, then interpreting the correspondences when mapped onto another numbered group (Lewis 2006a: 276). This included numbers within a cosmological framework, for instance, of the four quadrants (*sifang*), the five positions (four directions and the centre), eight positions (with intermediate directions), nine palaces (a grid), and twelve degrees (ibid.). The cosmological and religious implications of these numbers are discussed later.

Poo provides extensive details of some of these practices, organised according to the agricultural cycle, the life cycle, as well as the consultation of handbooks for daily activities such as auspicious and inauspicious times for tailors to make new garments, for baths, and, especially, for travel (ibid. 123–56). During the Han period, people also focused in particular on siting: on where to build, how to position and when to move – what is now called geomancy (ibid. 143–45). The variety of divination methods was fuelled in part by belief in an extensive array of beings, some of which were expressed in Chinese myths. These beings included gods and goddesses with different capabilities, demons, strange lands and peoples, animals and hybrid creatures, flora and fauna, and aspects of the natural landscape (Lewis 2009: 575–82; Birrell 1993). A major assumption that undergirded divination practices was the belief that each person had the capacity to influence their well-being through forging a *do ut des* – a give-and-take – relationship directly with gods, powers and spirits (Poo 1998: 28, 61, 215).

Some of these religious practices reflected, and bred, superstition: they sought to determine auspicious times for a whole range of activities, including ‘marriage, childbirth, making clothes, building projects, travel, slaughtering farm animals, farming, and official audiences ... [as well as] dreams, illness and leisure, and military activities’ (Raphals 2010: 131). There were also dark arts – curses, black magic, and seductive charms – that induced fear (Lin 2009: 447–56). However, these were only one aspect of popular religious belief. Over the Warring States period and into the Han, there were noticeable changes in how the relation between the human and the divine was conceived. One important change was the belief that, through sustained cultivation practice, individuals could develop unusual capacities in a range of spheres including in the corporeal (in physical fitness and vitality), ethical, intellectual, and extra-sensory. These beliefs were nested within a broader cosmological framework, whereby humans were able to harness the powers and energies from their environmental and cosmological contexts. In the case of kings, and sometimes their officials, effective exercise of their ethico-political capacities was necessary for the realisation of the human Way (*dao*), in cooperation with Heaven and Earth.

Cosmology

Both the Confucian and Daoist traditions situate their discussions of an ideal society and human flourishing within a cosmological framework that reaches beyond the human realm. The discourses in both traditions share a common vocabulary, such as Heaven, Earth, *dao*, *qi* (energies), *yin-yang*, and *wuxing* (five phases). In addition, both traditions advocate disciplined and arduous practices in order to cultivate various capacities. However, as we shall see, there are significant differences in their methods and aims of self-cultivation and these are directly related to their respective conceptions of humanity and divinity.

The idea of a context beyond one’s immediate experience was already present in the Shang. A prominent conceptual scheme of that period was the notion of the four quadrants or directions (*sifang*) of the world expressing a sense of place. The Shang kings were careful to attend to *di*-sacrifices directed at the four cardinal directions (Guo 1978–82; cited in Wang 2000: 28–34); in this case, the *sifang* are most appropriately understood as ‘four directions’. In geographical terms, *sifang* indicated *areas on the periphery* – of distant lands and their peoples – that were external to the life of Shang society (Wang 2000: 23–28; Allan 1991: 74–98). *Sifang* may also be understood as ‘four quadrants’, where it was used symbolically to place the Shang royal house in the centre of the four quadrants – at the sacred fifth point. The idea of centrality was an important one – and it grew more prominent when the Zhou overthrew the Shang. It was graphically captured by the Chinese character, *ya* (𠄎) (Allan 1991: 99). Allan suggests that the shape of the cross resembles the turtle plastron and, correspondingly, that the turtle was a model

of the Shang cosmos, '[with its carapace] seen as the sky and [its plastron] the earth with [its legs symbolising] four pillars in the northeast, southeast, northwest and southwest' (ibid. 101). Allan suggests that the figure of the four quadrates and its centre, forming five parts, may have been a factor in the development of fives in Chinese numerology such as the five mountains and five ministers (Allan 1991: 101). However, as Allan's thesis draws partly on later texts – over one and a half millennia later than the Shang – that the Shang *held* these myths is questionable (Lewis 2009: 548).

Another important cosmological picture significant in the Han was the nine-square grid. It had already figured in spatial terms during the Warring States period when, for example, it was proposed in the *Mengzi* that land should be allocated according to a nine-square well-field system, the character itself resembling a grid (井) (*Mengzi* 3B9). The grid also had religious and cosmological significance. First, it was the dominant understanding of the world 'within the four seas' during the Han, where China was said to occupy the southeast corner (Lewis 2006a: 247–60, at 252). Secondly, it was a schematic representation of the cosmos – magic squares – with systematic correspondences across a range of domains (Major 1984). Thirdly, the ritual hall during Han times, known as *ming tang* (the bright hall), had nine rooms, which was a replica of the structure of the cosmos. The emperor would reorganise his dwellings, garments and style of government, across the seasonal variations associated with each of the nine halls (Lewis 2006a: 260–73). It is not possible within this space to dwell further on the different cosmological pictures. Other noteworthy accounts of Chinese cosmology include Needham *et al.* (1959), Major (1993), Henderson (1984), and Pankenier (1998).

Ancient Chinese cosmology proposed a worldview that incorporated continuities and correspondences across the human and divine realms. All human activities were irretrievably interwoven with those of other beings, and all of these were enfolded within cosmic processes. Concomitantly, change was understood to be inevitable and imminent. The ontological commitment to a dynamic cosmological framework also served as an explanatory framework for understanding and organising life. One of the implications of the belief in a reality that was constantly in flux was that the idea of a transcendental, unchanging order, or that of an independent and enduring deity, did not figure prominently, if at all, within Confucianism and Daoism. The following section investigates the conceptual framework of change, its expression in concepts such as *yin-yang* and *wuxing*, and its manifestations across different realms.

Change and correspondences

The concept of change is captured explicitly in the character *yi* (易), understood in a Han period etymological text, the *Shuowen Jiezi*, in two ways. First, the character resembles a lizard and therefore displays its 'easy mobility and changeableness ... one of the lizards, the chameleon, is the epitome of changeableness' (*Shuowen* 卷十: 易部; Wilhelm 1973: 14). Secondly, the character comprises two other characters, the sun (日) and the moon (月) (*Shuowen* 卷十: 易部). In the *Book of Songs*, *yin* is associated with rain (Ode 35) and *yang* with the sun that dries the dew (Ode 174). In Ode 250, *yin* and *yang* denote the shady and sunny sides of a mountain, respectively, to capture the regular succession of shade and sunlight according to the position of the sun. In this early usage, *yin* and *yang* express the idea of alternation.

During the Han, *yin-yang* acquired a sense of bi-polarity, defined by their relative positions (Wilhelm 1979: 195). The *Xici Zhuan*, a Han dynasty commentary included in the *Book of Changes*, explicitly addresses *yin-yang* in relation to change:

In capaciousness and greatness, change corresponds to Heaven and Earth; in the way change achieves complete fulfilment, change corresponds to the four seasons; in terms

of the concepts of *yin* and *yang*, change corresponds to the sun and moon; and in the efficacy of its ease and simplicity, change corresponds to perfect virtue.

(*Xici zhuan* 1.6, translated by Lynn 1994: 56)

While retaining its older association with the sun and the moon, the *Xici Zhuan* locates both *yin* and *yang* in the teleological processes of the cosmic and human worlds. Elsewhere, the dualistic schema of *yin-yang* was used to explain a range of phenomena, including seasonal change, the human life cycle, and the rise and fall of dynasties. An extensive list of correlates of *yin* and *yang* are provided in an early Han Daoist text, the *Mawangdui Laozi B*. *Yin* is correlated, for example, with earth, autumn, winter, night, inaction, below, woman, younger, base, being controlled by others, silence, and receiving. Correspondingly, *yang* is correlated with Heaven, spring, summer, day, action, above, man, older, noble, controlling others, speech and giving (cited in Graham 1986: 27–28). *Yin* and *yang* operated in a conceptual framework that emphasised bipolarity, harmony and interdependence; while a duality, they were never conceived of in antithetical or antagonistic terms (Major 1993: 28).

In relation to the notion *wuxing*, its earliest references referred to the *materiality* of five basic elements, the five materials (*wucaì*) – wood, fire, earth, metal, and water (Graham 1986: 74). The phrase was also used to refer to the attributes of these five materials: ‘the nature of water is to soak and descend; of fire, to blaze and ascend; of wood, to be crooked and straight; of metal, to yield and change; while the virtue of earth is seen in seed-sowing and in gathering’ (*Hong Fan* chapter, *Book of Documents*; translated by Legge 1865, Vol 3. Pt. 2: 325–26). The discussion continues, forging correspondences between these attributes of the five elements and the five tasks (*wushi*) of humans, five divisions of time (*wuji*) and five sources of happiness (*wufu*) (ibid. 325–44). By the Han, this latter use of *wuxing* was common, referring to the distinctive qualities of an element rather than the element itself. Its application in a range of discourses included the legitimisation of particular styles of leadership. It is used in this way in the *Huainanzi*, a text belonging to the *Huang-Lao* tradition, a fusion of Daoist concepts with Legalist (*fajia*) strategies, culminating in the notion of the Yellow Emperor (Ryden 1997; Major 1993: 32–38). The *Huainanzi* interprets *wuxing* in terms of a conquest cycle (wood – earth – water – fire – metal) to justify its argument for a Daoist style of government (Graham 1986: 81–82). In contrast, Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–c. 104 BCE) used a generative cycle (wood – fire – earth – metal – water) to establish a Confucian model (Wang 2000: 190–95). Interestingly, both texts used a similar vocabulary (*dao*, *tian*, *yin-yang*, *wuxing*, and *qi*) in their contrastive cosmological warrants for rulership. It is clear that, by this time, *wuxing* is most aptly captured by the translation ‘five phases’ rather than ‘five elements’ (Graham 1986: 77).

Another significant feature of Han cosmological thinking is the postulation of systematic correspondences across various domains, as, for instance, between astrological events and political scenarios, and the human body. Many of these correspondences were analogical and metaphorical, though the correspondences traversed much larger domains than analogies typically do (Henderson 1984: 1). As we would expect, the attempts to explain a wide variety of cosmic, historical and social correspondences often resulted in forced-fits (ibid. 9–12; 89–118). One particular type of correspondence is resonance (*ganying*), where events in one domain are causally connected to those in another, resonating in mutual sympathy. The spirit of *ganying* is most palpable in acoustical and musical resonances (Henderson 1984: 22–23) although during the Han and after, it spread to a wide range of fields, including poetry, human physiology and health, diet, alchemy, and geomancy (ibid. 47–53).

The notion that events were causally related across different domains was reasonably widespread. For example, the ‘Monthly Ordinances’ (*Yue Ling*) of the Confucian *Record of Rites*

comprises twelve sections according to the months of the year. For each of these months, the text identifies the divine ruler and spirits, animal, musical note, pitch-tube, number, taste, smell, sacrifice, and human organ. There is also detail on the appropriate hall, raiment, accessories and diet of the king, the rituals he should attend to, and prohibitions and warnings, for example, that war should not be undertaken in a certain month (Legge 1885: 92–131). There are consequences that reverberate across domains, if the correlations are ignored. For instance, the *Book of Documents* states that ‘If throughout the year, the month, the day, the seasonableness is interrupted, the various kinds of grain do not become matured; the operations of government are dark and unwise; heroic men are reduced to obscurity; and in the families of the people there is no repose’ (*Hong Fan*, translated by Legge 1865, Pt. 2: 341–42).

These beliefs had far-reaching consequences for ordinary people in their daily lives as well, manifested in their attitudes and beliefs in *ganying* and correspondences in a wide range of activities including food, health and geomantic practices (Sterckx 2006; Henderson 1994). In geomancy, for example, the compass incorporated ‘practically all of the systems and series the Chinese used to measure or represent elements of space, time, and cosmic change’ (Notes on ‘FIG. 8.11. Illustration of a Geomantic Compass’, Henderson 1994: 217). Yet, ‘knowledge of general geomantic rules of thumb was surprisingly widespread in late traditional Chinese society’ (ibid. 216).

Conceptually, the five phases gradually displaced the *sifang* model – the emperor at the centre – with one that shifts and is in flux. This had important implications for government, evidenced in the fact that the ritual cycle based on *wuxing* became a key feature of Han imperial rule (Loewe 1974). From a meta-ethical point of view, the commitment to a dynamic cosmological order entails the cultivation of skills in order to cope with and respond to these changes. Texts belonging to the Confucian and Daoist traditions proposed models of cooperation between Heaven, Earth and humanity, carefully carving out the domain of human action within the cosmological context. We examine each of these in the sections that follow.

Self-cultivation in Confucianism

The concept *tian* plays a particularly prominent role in Confucian discourse, bearing a range of meanings through time and in the hands of different Confucian thinkers. *Tian* played a major role in the Zhou conquest of the Shang dynasty. Many Zhou texts assert that the Shang kings lost the Mandate of Heaven (*tianming*); and that the early Zhou kings, Wen (r. 1099–1050 BCE), and Wu (r. 1046–1043 BCE) received the Mandate (Puett 2002: 58–63). The replacement of *Di*, the Shang high god, by *tian* was not merely terminological; for the Confucians, *tian* was the paradigm of order and harmony (Puett 2002: 55). There was increasing use of the phrases ‘Son of Heaven’ (*tianzi*) and ‘Mandate of Heaven’ (*tianming*), both of which were central to the political and religious legitimacy of Western Zhou rule (Kern 2009: 150). The notion of *tian* and its place in cosmology has also been interpreted in a number of ways. For Eno, *tian* undergoes an evolutionary process during the Zhou, from a ‘highly anthropomorphic religious cosmology’ to a ‘more rational philosophical view’ (Eno 1990: 4). Pankenier (1998: 170) offers a more extended account of the development of the Chinese cosmological worldview, arguing that Zhou (Confucian) ethics, grounded in the harmony of *tian* and humanity, was a re-statement of earlier, pre-Shang cosmology. On this view, ancestor worship during the Shang was an aberration in the development of *tian* as a basis for ethical life (ibid. 173–74; 176). These views of a developmental cosmological trajectory have been challenged, however, on whether it is appropriate to use in the case of ancient China a model of development that moves from more primitive to more rationalistic (Puett 2002: 61–68).

In the main Warring States Confucian texts, the *Analects*, the *Mengzi*, and the *Xunzi*, *tian* is connected to human ethical life, though the connections are spelt out differently in the texts. In the *Analects*, a compendium of conversations between Confucius and his interlocutors, the ordinances of *tian*, *tianming*, are held in high regard by the ‘paradigmatic’ person while the ‘small’ person simply does not grasp them (*Analects* 16.8). *Tianming* in this text is to be distinguished from *ming*, fate, which simply means one’s allocated lifespan. In normative terms, human culture derives from *tian*’s patterns (*wen*) (*Analects* 8.19), and it is the task of the sage to enact these patterns in human society (*Analects* 8.9). Here, we detect a teleological and non-dualistic conception of Confucian cosmology, whereby humans should bring to fruition the dictates of *tian*. Yet, there is no mention of *tian* as having a sentient, regulative role in human conduct (Puett 2002: 100). Nor does the text hold *tian* blameworthy for human and natural disasters, a view in a number of late Western Zhou texts, when there was unrest resulting in the fall of its capital in 771 BCE. For example, the odes in the *Book of Songs* written during this time blame ‘pitiless Heaven’ (Pines 2002: 57–61), accuse its commands of going awry, including the charge that ‘Were there one who could bring peace, [*tian*] would overcome him’ (*Shijing* 192.4, cited in Eno 1990: 27).

The *Analects* maintains reverential distance from *tian*: Confucius does not murmur against *tian* (*Analects* 14.35). By contrast, the *Mengzi* seems to be more ambivalent about whether *tian* is always worthy of esteem (*Mengzi* 2B.13; 7B.10), at times holding *tian* responsible when things do not go right (*Mengzi* 1B.16. See the discussion in Perkins 2006: 295–306). The Mencian conception of *tian* is altogether more complex as *tian* is at the same time the source of humanity’s innate moral inclinations (*Mengzi* 2A.6; 7B.25; 7B.31). Because events under the jurisdiction of *tian* may be good or bad, Mencius places greater responsibility on people and, ultimately, on the sage for attaining social order (*Mengzi* 6A.7). He also provides a more thorough account of what is necessary for human flourishing: the four sprouts of innate moral goodness, namely, benevolence (*ren*), rightness (*yi*), ritual propriety (*li*), and wisdom (*zhi*), which are located in the human mind-heart, *xin* (2A.6). Endowed by *tian*, *xin* is the focal point of humanity and human flourishing. Mencius also draws on the notion of *qi* to establish the continuity between *tian*’s *telos* and human morality: the floodlike *qi* ‘is supremely great and supremely unyielding. If one cultivates it with uprightness and does not harm it, it will fill up the space between Heaven and Earth’ (Van Norden 2008: 39). While Mencius’ moral metaphysics provides a more thorough program for self-cultivation, it faces theological dilemmas. For example, he needs to account for the problem of evil in light of the moral sprouts of goodness (Perkins 2006), and for the tension in *tian*, which endows humans with the primary capacity for moral goodness and yet wreaks havoc.

The *Xunzi*’s *tian* is commonly characterised as ‘naturalistic’, to capture its ethical disengagement (Machle 1993: 14–15). This interpretation is based in particular on the discussions in the ‘Discussion on Heaven’ (*Tian Lun*) chapter, which separates the domains of *tian* and humanity: ‘Heaven has its seasons; Earth its resources; and Man his government’ (*Xunzi* 17.2; translated in Knoblock 1994: 15). Yet, we must understand that this is not a denial of engagement but rather a delineation of what may be attributed to *tian* and what is a result of human actions and decisions. In fact, Xunzi asserts the importance of engagement according to these terms: competition (*zheng*) with *tian* is to be avoided, and the ideal is a model of cooperative participation (*can*). A cosmic hierarchy is maintained with Heaven embodying its perfect *yang*, and Earth its perfect *yin*. Among the Confucian texts discussed so far, *Xunzi*’s *tian* is most closely aligned with the notion of a constant, divine order – which, incidentally, Xunzi does not hold to account for human and natural disasters. Hence, Edward Machle rejects the common interpretation of *Xunzi*’s *tian* as naturalistic, arguing that, for Xunzi, *tian* is both at the apex of the hierarchy, yet

contained within a mutually-defining triadic relationship (ibid. 153–54). This is a view that has no room for *fangshi* or divination practices. Xunzi's program involves cultivation of the self, effected by enlightened, sagacious government that regulates human society through ritual propriety and penal law (*fa*), as well as the development of appropriate (moral) sentiment (*qing*) (Xunzi 17.4). Machle quotes a section of the Xunzi's *Yue Lun* (Discussion on Music) that, he argues, best exemplifies Xunzi's commitment to correlative cosmology:

[T]he spirit of the dance joins with the Way of Heaven. The drum is surely the lord of music, is it not? Hence, it resembles Heaven, while the bells resemble earth, the sounding stones resemble water, the mouth organs and lutes resemble the sun, and the scrapers resemble the myriad beings of creation. How can one understand the spirit of the dance? ... when all the posturing and movements, all the steps and changes of pace, are ordered and none are lacking in the proper restraint ... there is the spirit of the dance in all its manifold fullness and intensity!

(Watson 1963: 118, cited in Machle 1993: 180)

This passage also reveals the coherence of Xunzi's program, the realisation of the *Dao* of Heaven (*tiandao*) through human participation in a thoughtful, disciplined, and aesthetic life, resulting in the establishment of cultural institutions (*wen*). For Xunzi, the integration and engagement of humanity in the continuing flux of the cosmological processes is a prominent feature of Confucian religious thought.

In the Han, Dong Zhongshu (c. 179–104 BCE) incorporated the vocabulary of *qi* and *wuxing*, and the pivotal role of the emperor, successfully persuading Emperor Wudi to establish Confucian orthodoxy during his reign in the late Han, by 135 BCE. On the basis of Dong's ideas, Emperor Wu consolidated Confucian thought in the Confucian *Five Classics* – comprising the *Book of Songs*, the *Book of Documents*, the *Record of Rites*, the *Book of Changes*, and the *Spring and Autumn Annals* (*Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan*) – and established an imperial college for training in Confucian thought (De Bary 1999: 311–18). As in Xunzi's arguments, Dong distinguished the qualities of each of the three key domains: Heaven, Earth, and humanity. Dong weaves them into a cosmology governed by *yin-yang* polarity that moves through the five phases:

The [*qi*] of Heaven and Earth join as the One, divide as Yin and Yang, halve as the Four Seasons, assume an arrangement as the Five Processes. 'Process' is proceeding; they proceed dissimilarly, and are therefore called the Five Processes.

(Chunqiu Fanlu 59.1, translated in Graham 1986: 90)

Dong used the graph for emperor, 王 (*wang*), symbolically to represent Heaven, humanity and Earth, respectively, with each of its horizontal strokes, while the vertical stroke captured the emperor's *dao* – the *dao of humanity* – in realising the unity of the three realms (Chunqiu Fanlu 44). The king's task is to ensure the best fit of human socio-political life to the shifting cosmological patterns of Heaven and Earth. This program gave weight to the role of the emperor but it also constrained him. Calamities, even natural ones, were attributed to him as events that *seemed* spontaneous but actually were not (Chunqiu Fanlu 65.1). There is an implicit assumption of causal continuities and correspondences across realms in this denial of spontaneity. In Dong's account, there is likewise no place for divination, but rather the development of human hearing and sight in order to interact appropriately with the processes of the causative *yin-yang* movements (Puett 2002: 292).

This brief examination of a few representative Confucian texts up to the Han reveals a number of aspects of Confucian religious thought. It recognises the domain of what is properly

human and, therefore, gives scope for meaning in human life: the patterns and harmonies (*he*) in the cosmological context *require* a human response. Texts like the *Great Learning* in the *Record of Rites* from the Han period emphasise the ruler's central role in facilitating the cultivation of virtue. In the finer details of the Confucian vision, human life is irreducibly moral; there are quintessentially human capacities – most prominently the mind-heart – whose function is to realise the heavenly patterns in bringing about order under Heaven (*zhi tianxia*). The set of Confucian virtues, including benevolence (*ren*), trustworthiness (*xin*), filial piety (*xiao*), as well as appropriate moral sentiments, are manifest through ritual propriety. This assists in the realisation of harmonious equilibrium in the microcosm, which emulates and resonates appropriately with those in the cosmological macrocosm; the resonances are the particular focus of another chapter in the *Record of Rites*, the *Doctrine of the Mean*. Although the task of humanity is to fulfil Heaven's *telos*, there is no requirement to replicate the values or qualities of a transcendent deity, nor is there an injunction to abide by abstractly-determined fixed principles. In that regard, the Confucian texts stress the importance of listening (*wen*) and observing (*guan*) in order to attune oneself to these patterns (e.g. *Analects* 2.18; 17.9). The issue of *patterning* human behaviours continued to occupy Confucian discourse in the Neo-Confucian period, with discussions on modelling *li* (pattern) on *tianli* (Heavenly pattern). The phrase that captures a distinctive feature of Confucianism, 'unity of Heaven and humanity' (*tian ren he yi*), was coined by Zhang Zai, a Neo-Confucian thinker, to capture the inherent capacity of humans to embody the Heavenly Way (Zhang 1989: 4). The question of finding one's *place* – be it in human relationships, society, or the cosmological context – is a central theme in Confucianism. In this regard, the characterisation of Confucianism as a 'collectivist' culture (in not a few sociological analyses) appears simplistic, as it fails to recognise the profundity of the cosmological framework in Confucian thought.

Self-cultivation in Daoism

In the opening passage of the 'Heavenly Patterns' chapter of the *Huainanzi*, the origins of life are described in cosmological terms:

When Heaven and Earth were yet unformed, all was
 ascending and flying,
 diving and delving.
 Thus it was called the Grand Inception.
 The Grand Inception [*dao*] produced the Nebulous Void.
 The Nebulous Void produced space-time;
 space-time produced the original *qi*.
 A boundary [divided] the original *qi*.
 That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven;
 that which was heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth.
 ...
 The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced yin and yang.
 The supersessive essences of yin and yang caused the four seasons.
 The scattered essences of the four seasons created the myriad things ...

(*Huainanzi* 3/18/18–23; translated in Major et al. 2010: 114–15)

Key terms in this cosmogonic picture – *tian*, *dao*, *yin-yang*, four seasons – are from a common vocabulary shared with Confucianism. What are the distinctive features of Daoist religious

cosmology? Over the Warring States up until the Han, we may identify two main differences in the Confucian and Daoist approaches to divinity. However, these should not be taken as defining characteristics of the respective traditions. They are at best broad generalisations which are nevertheless helpful in thinking through the two approaches to cosmology and divinity. The first difference is that, in some Daoist texts – as, indeed, in the *Huainanzi* passage above – *dao* is referred to as the origin or source, and at times used co-terminously with *tian* as the ground of all being. In Confucian texts, references to *dao* typically carve out domain- or being-appropriate activities or behaviours. Therefore, they designate normative standards and are not normally construed in metaphysical terms. For example, the *dao* of humanity (*rendao*) is contrasted with, but complements, Heavenly *dao* (e.g. in *Xunzi*, *Chunqiu Fanlu*, *Discourses of the White Tiger Hall* and *Lunheng*). Hence, *tiandao* and *tianli* (Heavenly patterns) may overlap in meaning, or they may be used interchangeably.

In the *Huainanzi* passage above, the picture of origination conveys a common source, *dao*, which, in time and space, gives rise to *yin* and *yang* and, ultimately, the myriad things (*wanwu*). As in Confucian cosmology, there is a place for Heaven and Earth, a cooperative dualism that continues to manifest in the polarities of *yin* and *yang*. However, unlike in Confucianism, *dao* is at the origin, characterised as primal: unformed, chaotic, and nebulous. The originating patterns of *tian* set out at the start of this early Han text of 21 chapters, establishes the primacy of these patterns. The text, commissioned by the King of Huainan, Liu An (179–122 BCE), emphasises the alignment of the King's rule with Heaven's patterns. The remainder of the chapter is highly technical, requiring the king and technical experts to interpret and understand cosmological correlations (Major *et al.* 2010: 109–12). It also seems that the authors of other chapters of the text promoted a range of cosmological schemes, including those in which the king's capacities were comparable to those of spirits and could control natural phenomena (Puett 2002: 259–86).

Another Daoist text, the *Laozi*, that would have been compiled by the third century BCE, also advocates the primary status of *dao*. Very much a composite text, one of its passages presents an origination story that begins with *dao*:

[*Dao*] produced the One.

The One produced the two.

The two produced the three.

And the three produced the ten thousand things.

The ten thousand things carry the *yin* and embrace the *yang*, and through the blending of [*qi*] they achieve harmony ...

(*Laozi* 42; translated in Chan 1963: 176)

Various passages in this text celebrate the mysterious (*xuan*) nature of the primal *dao* (*Laozi* 6, 10). Certain passages advocate a return to a primal state, using the imagery of the uncarved block to capture its simplicity (*pu*) (*Laozi* 32, 62, 15, 65). This reversal (*fan*) involves a rejection of conventional values and pursuits (*Laozi* 2, 5, 12, 18–20). In spite of the text's various references to spontaneity (*ziran*), *Laozi* 17 suggests this is only superficial. In other words, the sage's effective leadership *seems* spontaneous to the people. In fact, the sage who penetrates the mystery of *dao* has immense power in effecting 'great conformity' (*da shun*), facilitating the return of the myriad things to *dao* (*Laozi* 65, 17).

The second major difference between the Daoist and Confucian traditions is that Confucianism celebrates the cultural institutions as the key to the realisation of social order. By contrast, Daoism views socialisation, institutionalisation, and regulation as threats: they alienate humans from their primary locus of authenticity. Therefore, Daoist self-cultivation involves the

restoration of unity with the primordial *dao*. There is a basic dualism between human artifices, on the one hand, and the authentic *dao*, on the other. In this regard, the Daoist notion of *wuwei* – often inadequately translated as non-action – involves *both* the rejection of conventional norms and watchful vigilance against them.

The *Zhuangzi*, a Warring States text (which also has mixed authorship especially in the last 26 of its 33 extant chapters), likewise maintains the primacy of *dao* in the originating cosmological processes, establishing its place prior to spirits and *Di* (*Zhuangzi* 16/6/29–36). The ultimate person (*zhiren*) is oblivious to the distinctions made in conventional life: anxiety, taste, beauty, and the two key Confucian virtues, benevolence and rightness (*Zhuangzi* 6/2/64–70). In fact, he is unaffected by what is typically considered advantageous or harmful, including natural phenomena such as blazing woodlands, the chill of frozen lakes, thunderbolts and whirlwinds, and has control over them (*Zhuangzi* 6/2/71–73; following Graham's translation 2001: 58). He has also transcended the life–death distinction: ‘death and life alter nothing in himself’ (*ibid.*). This suggests immortality: he is not simply *like* a spirit, he *is* spirit. The genuine person (*zhenren*), another referent for the sage in the *Zhuangzi*, is ‘someone in whom neither Heaven nor man is victor over the other’ (*Zhuangzi* 6/16/19–20; Graham 2001: 85). The sage's cultivation involves the fasting of the mind–heart (*xinzhai*), a process that denies both the fasting practices associated with divination, as well as the *exercise* and discipline of the mind–heart as advocated by the Confucians (*Zhuangzi* 9/4/24–34). For the *Zhuangzi*, the proper capacity for forging attunement is *qi*, vital energy, which enables a person to acquire the state of emptiness (*xu*), which is where *dao* accumulates (*Zhuangzi* 9/4/27–28).

What is ‘emptiness’? It is the liberation from being tied to things and values in the conventional world. Puett (2002: 129) acutely describes Zhuangzian liberation in light of the teleological undertow of the text: ‘the liberation that arises from no longer being dependent on things arises from accepting the order of Heaven’. The monistic cosmology requires the attuned sage to be like a vessel: the teacher whose name is ‘Huzi’ (vessel) playfully taunts a technical expert whose speciality is physiognomy (*Zhuangzi* 20/7/15–21/7/31). The vessel is an important metaphor as it symbolises the emptiness of the Daoist sage: only as an empty vessel, devoid of conventional values and attitudes, can a person store elements of the Heavenly *dao*. The teacher Huzi shows, in his face, these different elements at each of the shaman's subsequent visits: the earthly patterns, heavenly grounds, vital energies, and the origins prior to the rise of the ancestors. The shaman flees after his last visit when he is shown the cosmological picture prior to existence. This story highlights a few important elements of the *Zhuangzi*'s attention to the divine and helps to sum up what we have discussed so far. First, the cultivation of the self involves the eradication of one's conventional, this-worldly learning so that a person may be properly guided by her vital energies. Secondly, what is afforded by *qi* is *direct* insight into the cosmological processes, rendering divination practices superfluous.

There are similar themes in the ‘Inward Training’ chapter of the *Guanzi*, a fourth-century BCE text. Although the text belongs to the Legalist tradition, the ‘Inward Training’ chapter's presentation of extensive details about Daoist meditation techniques makes it unique in its time. The chapter shares many similar themes with the *Zhuangzi*, including its disdain for divination (*Guanzi* XI.1; trans. by Rickett 1998: 51), the centrality of alignment with the primal *dao*, and the cleansing of the ‘house’ in order that vital essence (*jing*) will arrive therein (*Guanzi* VII.3; Rickett 1998: 45). In the ‘Inward Training’, the vital essence is the source of all living things, even of spirits and ghosts (Rickett 1998: 29); when humans concentrate their vital energies, they will be ‘like spirits’ (*ru shen*) (*Guanzi* XI.1; translated by Rickett 1998: 50). The chapter also promotes control of pulse, breath, emotions, and diet to attain concentrated *qi* (*Guanzi* XI.2–XIV.1; translated by Rickett 1998: 51–55; see Roth 1999 for a detailed analysis of the ‘Inward Training’ chapter).

In summary, the Daoist texts we have examined demonstrate some hostility to prevailing practices, traditions, and customs. The demarcation between Confucianism and Daoism became more pronounced in the Han, as we have seen, when thinkers attempted to persuade rulers to adopt particular models for government. The establishment of Confucian orthodoxy in the Han seems to have precipitated some backlash from the Daoists. At around 3 BCE, a peasant cult associated with Daoism organised a rebellion. This cult worshipped the Queen Mother of the West (*Xi Wang Mu*), a mythical figure worshipped by both elites and peasants (Cahill 1993: 23–24). The Queen Mother of the West represented the *yin* – the dark, female force – in Daoist thought. That this was recorded in the *Book of Han* is an indication of its severity, as peasant concerns were rarely recorded in these historiographies (ibid.: 21–23). Cahill suggests that these activities foreshadowed the Daoist peasant revolts which brought the downfall of the Han Dynasty in 220 CE (ibid.: 21). Loewe also considers the possibility that worship of the Queen Mother of the West may have developed in order to fill a gap in Dong Zhongshu's Confucian orthodoxy: the question of what happened after death and, associated with it, the possibility of attaining immortality (Loewe 1979: 97).

In the period immediately following the Han, during the Six Dynasties, there was an 'iconoclastic counterculture movement' against the Confucian orthodoxy (Chan; in Chan and Lo 2010: 3). One of the key characteristics of this movement was not the rejection of Confucianism but the scrutiny of so-called 'Confucian' teachings in the Han. The movement involved unlocking the mystery of *dao* by reinterpreting the teachings of Confucius, and became known as 'Xuanxue'. Another prominent theme during this period when Daoism flourished was the pursuit of great peace (*tai ping*), wherein the end of Han was interpreted as an eschatological ending. The *Scripture of Great Peace* (*Taiping Jing*), a sixth-century text, grew out of this context. The text was associated with millenarian movements that had a program for salvation, sought fairness for women, and a fairer society overall (Hendrichske 2007).

Conclusion

The ancient Chinese engaged in divination practices and sacrificial rituals to foretell the future, and to appease spirits and powers. These attempts to secure better personal outcomes for themselves and, in the case of emperors, for the State as well, reflect anxieties about change, affairs beyond human control, and the unknown. The engagement of specialists to conduct these activities suggests a level of helplessness on the part of individuals, and the awareness of human limitations, in accessing the sphere of the divine. Yet, on the other hand, belief in a comprehensive and correlative cosmological framework is enabling as all beings have their place within this framework. These metaphysical commitments, together with the belief in continual flux, make it imperative that humans have an appropriate response to the ongoing processes of the cosmos. Existing literature on the Confucian and Daoist traditions – and *beyond* these traditions – bears out immensely rich and subtle ethico-religious aspects of Chinese thought. In this barest sketch of the Confucian and Daoist responses to this cosmological view, we have seen the optimistic and *ennobling* proposals that affirm the place of humanity – indeed, of each individual – within their respective teleologies. Notwithstanding important differences, both traditions take into account not only individuals and their actions but their place and relationships within the cosmological framework. Their delineation of what is, and what is not, within the domain of the human may be seen as naturalistic, or as a move toward rationalisation. I have suggested instead that we understand Confucian and Daoist self-cultivation as attempts to empower individuals, for them to develop skills and capacities, so as to be attuned to the 'pipes of Heaven' (*Zhuangzi* 3/2/3–4).

List of dates

Table 7.2

Neolithic period		pre-2000 BCE
Xia (mythical?)		c. 2200 BCE–1760 BCE
Shang dynasty		17 th – 11 th centuries BCE
Zhou dynasty		c. 1122 BCE–221 BCE
	Western Zhou	c. 1045 BCE–771 BCE
	Eastern Zhou	771 BCE–221 BCE
	Warring States period	475 BCE–221 BCE
Qin dynasty		221 BCE–206 BCE
Han dynasty		206 BCE–220 CE
Six dynasties		220–589

Glossary of Chinese terms

Table 7.3

<i>Analects of Confucius</i>	<i>Lunyu</i>	論語
Anyang	<i>Anyang</i>	安陽
<i>Baoshan slips</i>	<i>Baoshan chujian</i>	包山楚簡
benevolence	<i>ren</i>	仁
<i>Book of Changes</i>	<i>Yijing</i>	易經
<i>Book of Documents</i>	<i>Shangshu</i>	尚書
<i>Book of Han</i>	<i>Han Shu</i>	漢書
<i>Book of the Later Han</i>	<i>Hou Hanshu</i>	後漢書
<i>Book of Songs</i>	<i>Shijing</i>	詩經
bovine scapula	<i>shou jiagu</i>	獸胛骨
bright hall	<i>ming tang</i>	明堂
Brilliant Emperor	<i>Huang Di</i>	皇帝
bring about order under Heaven	<i>zhi tianxia</i>	治天下
Cao Cao	<i>Cao Cao</i>	曹操
Chang Kwang-chih	<i>Zhang Guangzhi</i>	張光直
change	<i>yi</i>	易
<i>Changes of Zhou</i> (in the <i>Yijing</i>)	<i>Zhouyi</i>	周易
charge (a divination question)	<i>ming ci</i>	命辭
Chen Mengjia	<i>Chen Meng-jia</i>	陳夢家
<i>Chunqiu Fanlu</i>	<i>Chunqiu Fanlu</i>	春秋繁露
<i>Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan</i>	<i>Chunqiu Zuo Zhuan</i>	春秋左傳
competition	<i>zheng</i>	爭
Confucius	<i>Kongzi</i>	孔子
cooperative participation	<i>can</i>	參
cultural institutions (Confucian)	<i>wen</i>	文
<i>dao</i>	<i>dao</i>	道
<i>dao of Heaven</i>	<i>tiandao</i>	天道
<i>dao of humankind</i>	<i>rendao</i>	人道
daybooks	<i>rishu</i>	日書

Di	Di	帝
Di Xin	Di xin	帝辛
Di Yi	Di yi	帝乙
<i>Discourses of the White Tiger Hall</i>	<i>Bai Hu Tong</i>	白虎通
<i>Discussion on Music</i>	<i>Yue Lun</i>	樂論
<i>Discussions on Heaven</i> (chapter in the <i>Xunzi</i>)	<i>Tian Lun</i>	天論
<i>Doctrine of the Mean</i> (chapter in the <i>Record of Rites</i>)	<i>Zhong Yong</i>	中庸
Dong Zhongshu	<i>Dong Zhongshu</i>	董仲舒
Dong Zuobin	<i>Dong Zuobin</i>	董作賓
Duke of Zhou	<i>Zhou gong</i>	周公
Earth	<i>di</i>	地
Eastern Zhou (period)	<i>Dong zhou</i>	東周
Emperor	<i>wang</i>	王
emptiness	<i>xu</i>	虛
energies/vital energies	<i>qi</i>	氣
fasting the mind-heart	<i>xinzhai</i>	心齋
fate	<i>ming</i>	命
filial piety	<i>xiao</i>	孝
five divisions of time	<i>wuji</i>	五紀
five elements	<i>wuxing</i>	五行
Five Emperors	<i>Wudi</i>	五帝
five materials	<i>wucai</i>	五材
five ministers	<i>wuchen</i>	五臣
five mountains	<i>wushan</i>	五山
five phases	<i>wuxing</i>	五行
five sources of happiness	<i>wufu</i>	五福
five tasks	<i>wushi</i>	五事
four quadrants or directions	<i>sifang</i>	四方
Fuyang	<i>Fuyang</i>	阜陽
genuine person	<i>zhenren</i>	真人
great conformity	<i>da shun</i>	大順
<i>Great Learning</i> (chapter in the <i>Record of Rites</i>)	<i>Daxue</i>	大學
great peace	<i>tai ping</i>	太平
<i>Guanzi</i>	<i>Guanzi</i>	管子
<i>Guicang</i> (version of <i>Zhouyi</i> text)	<i>Guicang</i>	歸藏
Guodian	<i>Guodian</i>	郭店
<i>Guodian Chu Slips</i>	<i>Guodian Chu Jian</i>	郭店楚簡
Han Dynasty	<i>Hanchao</i>	漢朝
Han Wudi	<i>Han Wudi</i>	漢武帝
harmony	<i>he</i>	和
Heaven	<i>tian</i>	天
Heavenly pattern	<i>tianli</i>	天理
<i>Heavenly Patterns</i> (chapter in the <i>Huainanzi</i>)	<i>Tian Wen</i>	天文
Henan	<i>Henan</i>	河南
<i>Historical Records</i>	<i>Shiji</i>	史記
<i>Hong Fan</i> (chapter in the <i>Book of Documents</i>)	<i>Hong Fan</i>	洪範
Huainan	<i>Huainan</i>	淮南
<i>Huainanzi</i>	<i>Huainanzi</i>	淮南子
Huang-Lao	<i>Huang Lao</i>	黃老

Hubei	<i>Hubei</i>	湖北
<i>Inward Training</i> (chapter in the <i>Guanzi</i>)	<i>Neiye</i>	內業
king	<i>wang</i>	王
<i>Laozi</i>	<i>Laozi</i>	老子
Legalist	<i>fajia</i>	法家
like spirits	<i>ru shen</i>	如神
listen	<i>wen</i>	聞
Literati (Confucians)	<i>Ru</i>	儒
Liu An	<i>Liu An</i>	劉安
Liubo board	<i>liubo</i>	六博
<i>Lunheng</i>	<i>Lunheng</i>	論衡
Mandate of Heaven	<i>tianming</i>	天命
Mawangdui	<i>Mawangdui</i>	馬王堆
Mencius	<i>Mengzi</i>	孟子
<i>Mengzi</i>	<i>Mengzi</i>	孟子
mind-heart	<i>xin</i>	心
<i>Monthly Ordinances</i> (chapter in the <i>Record of Rites</i>)	<i>Yue Ling</i>	月令
moon	<i>yue</i>	月
myriad things	<i>wanwu</i>	萬物
mysterious	<i>xuan</i>	玄
observe	<i>guan</i>	觀
ordinances of Heaven	<i>tianming</i>	天命
paradigmatic person	<i>junzi</i>	君子
patterns	<i>li</i>	理
patterns	<i>wen</i>	文
penal law	<i>fa</i>	法
Qin dynasty	<i>Qinchao</i>	秦朝
Qin Shihuang	<i>Qin Shihuang</i>	秦始皇
Queen Mother of the West	<i>Xi Wang Mu</i>	西王母
<i>Record of Rites</i>	<i>Liji</i>	禮記
resonance	<i>ganying</i>	感應
reversal	<i>fan</i>	反
rightness	<i>yi</i>	義
ritual (in Confucianism: ritual propriety)	<i>li</i>	禮
River (power)	<i>he</i>	河
schools (of thought)	<i>jia</i>	家
<i>Scripture of Great Peace</i>	<i>Taiping Jing</i>	太平經
sentiment	<i>qing</i>	情
shaman	<i>wu</i>	巫
Shang Dynasty	<i>Shangchao</i>	商朝
Shun (Zhou sage king)	<i>Shun</i>	舜
<i>Shuowen Jiezi</i>	<i>Shuowen Jiezi</i>	說文解字
Sima Qian	<i>Sima Qian</i>	司馬遷
simplicity	<i>pu</i>	樸din
Six Dynasties	<i>Liu chao</i>	六朝
small person	<i>xiaoren</i>	小人
Son of Heaven	<i>tianzi</i>	天子
spirit/s	<i>shen</i>	神
spontaneity	<i>ziran</i>	自然
stem and branches (calendrical cycle)	<i>ganzhi</i>	干支
sun	<i>ri</i>	日

technical arts	<i>wushu</i>	巫術
technical experts	<i>fangshi</i>	方士
temple name	<i>gan</i>	干
Three Brilliances	<i>Sanhuang</i>	三皇
trustworthiness	<i>xin</i>	信
turtle plastrons	<i>gui fu jia</i>	龜腹甲
ultimate person	<i>zhiren</i>	至人
unity of Heaven and humanity	<i>tian ren he yi</i>	天人合一
vessel (name)	<i>huzi</i>	壺子
vital essence	<i>jing</i>	精
Warring States	<i>Zhanguo</i>	戰國
well-field system (nine-square grid)	<i>jing</i>	井
Wen (Zhou king)	<i>Zhou wen wang</i>	周文王
Western Zhou	<i>Xi zhou</i>	西周
wisdom	<i>zhi</i>	智
Wu (Zhou king)	<i>Zhou wu wang</i>	周武王
Wu Ding	<i>Wu ding</i>	武丁
<i>wuwei</i>	<i>wuwei</i>	無為
Xia Dynasty	<i>Xiachao</i>	夏朝
<i>Xici Zhuan</i> (Section of the <i>Book of Changes</i>)	<i>Xici Zhuan</i>	繫辭傳
<i>Xingde</i>	<i>Xingde</i>	刑德
Xuanxue	<i>Xuanxue</i>	玄學
<i>Xunzi</i> (text written by Xunzi, a Confucian thinker)	<i>Xunzi</i>	荀子
<i>ya</i>	<i>ya</i>	亞
<i>yang</i> (attributes associated with masculinity)	<i>yang</i>	陽
Yao (Zhou sage king)	<i>Yao</i>	堯
Yellow Emperor	<i>Huang Di</i>	黃帝
<i>yin</i> (attributes associated with femininity)	<i>yin</i>	陰
Yinxu	<i>Yinxu</i>	殷墟
<i>yin-yang</i>	<i>yinyang</i>	陰陽
Yu (Zhou sage king)	<i>Yu</i>	禹
Zhang Zai	<i>Zhang Zai</i>	張載
Zhou Dynasty	<i>Zhouchao</i>	周朝
<i>Zhuangzi</i> (text associated with Daoist thinker Zhuangzi)	<i>Zhuangzi</i>	莊子

8

ISLAMIC CONCEPTIONS OF DIVINITY

Imran Aijaz

Islam is a monotheistic religion, where belief in the divine involves belief in the existence of one God, or *Allah* (literally ‘the God’ in Arabic). The principal source that informs Islamic understanding of God is the Qur’an, followed by the collection of the ahadith: reports of the sayings or actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad. In many cases, the ahadith provide further elaboration on matters stated in Qur’anic verses, including those that mention God. In addition to what one finds in these two sources, the concept of God in Islam has been thoroughly discussed and debated in the works of many Muslim theologians and philosophers. In this chapter, I will begin by outlining the concept of God as it appears (primarily) in the Qur’an and ahadith. After that, I will comment on whether the concept of God that emerges from a reading of the Qur’an and ahadith mirrors, or falls in close proximity to, the dominant conception of God discussed by contemporary philosophers of religion. Next, I will provide a summary account of some important discussions and debates among classical Muslim thinkers about a number of divine attributes, such as God’s power, oneness, and knowledge. In the penultimate section of this chapter, I will touch on the Islamic understanding of God’s transcendence, as discussed by both classical and contemporary Muslim thinkers; I will argue, using the divine attribute of transcendence as an example, that how we understand the concept of God will have important implications when it comes to religious practice. In this chapter’s concluding section, I will end with a few brief remarks about the direction in which Muslim philosophers must take their thinking about the concept of God, if commitment to Islamic faith is to be regarded as reasonable.

God in the Qur’an and Ahadith

In this section, I will discuss some of the prominent attributes of God that are mentioned in the Qur’an and ahadith. As we will see, it is not at all clear that the picture of God that emerges from reading these sources warrants putting the Islamic religion under the rubric of what William Rowe (1984: 95) calls ‘standard theism’. Standard theism, as Rowe characterizes it, is any view that holds or entails that there exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good being. John Bishop (1998: 74) calls such a concept of God the ‘omniGod’, referring, more specifically, to the concept of a ‘unique omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, supernatural person who is creator and sustainer of all else that exists’. The majority of the discussion and literature in contemporary philosophy of religion focuses on the coherence and plausibility of standard

(omniGod) theism.¹ It is not clear, however, whether the Islamic concept of God, as it emerges from reading the Qur'an and ahadith, is best described by the label of standard theism. There are two reasons for this. First, it is questionable whether the descriptions of God's power, knowledge, and goodness, as stated in these texts, entail that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent. Second, although these are the three main attributes that are often used by philosophers of religion in their definitions of theism, they are not among the divine attributes that the Qur'an and ahadith emphasize, as I will now explain.

The most frequently recurring phrase in the Qur'an is known by the Arabic noun *basmallah* (or *bismillah*), which states: 'In the name of God, The Most Gracious, The Most Merciful'. The *basmallah* appears at the start of each of the *suras* (chapters) of the Qur'an, with the sole exception of the ninth sura.² In it are found two names of God, *Al-Rahman* and *Al-Raheem*, which are part of the collection of divine names often referred to as the '99 Names of God' – the names of God that are found in Qur'an and the ahadith. Both *Al-Rahman* and *Al-Raheem* derive from the word *rahmah*, which refers to mercy, but can also be used to mean love, kindness, and compassion. The Qur'an states that God has prescribed mercy for Himself (6:12; 6:34) and that it embraces all things (7:156). A hadith of the Prophet states that God's mercy outstrips His wrath (Sahih Muslim no. 7146, Kitab al-Tawbah). Indeed, all of the mercy that exists in the world is said to originate from the very small portion given to it by God, as stated in the following hadith:

God made mercy (into) one-hundred parts. He held back ninety-nine parts, and sent down one part to earth. It is from that part that creatures show mercy to each other, such that a mare will lift her hoof over her foal, fearing that she might harm him.

(Sahih al-Bukhari no. 6066, Kitab al-Adab)

In addition to God's mercy, the Qur'an and ahadith put a lot of emphasis on God as *Ghafur* – the forgiver of sins. Indeed, in about seventy different verses, the Qur'an links God's forgiveness with His mercy (e.g. 2:173, 2:182, 2:192, 2:199, 2:218, 2:226, 2:286 in the second sura of the Qur'an alone). According to the Qur'an, God forgives all sins, except *shirk* – the sin of associating something with Him in worship (4:116, 85:14).³ God is always ready to forgive human transgressions, so much so that one should never despair of the mercy of God (Qur'an 39:53).

Another divine attribute that is mentioned several times in the Qur'an is God's *oneness*, which is stressed in two ways; God is (indivisibly) one (*ahad*) and there is no deity other than God. Qur'an 2:163 puts it this way: 'And your god is one God. There is no god but He, Most Gracious, Most Merciful'. The Qur'an is clear that, in describing God as *ahad*, there is no room for multiplicity within the Godhead, as found in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Indeed, that doctrine is explicitly repudiated in several verses (e.g. 4:171, 112:3). In dozens of other verses, the Qur'an also makes clear that, other than God, no other deity exists (e.g. 2:255, 3:2, 3:6, 3:18, 3:62 and many other verses).

God is also described in the Qur'an many times as *Al-Khaliq* – the Creator of all that exists (6:102), of the heavens and the earth (14:10). For God, the creation of anything is said to be simply a matter of divine fiat: 'When He decrees a matter, He only says to it "Be", and it is' (3:47). Conceptually connected to the attribute of God as Creator is another divine attribute – *God as the only object worthy of our worship*. Consider, for instance, Qur'an 2:21: 'O mankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous'. God did not create this creation aimlessly (3:191). The only reason for our creation, according to the Qur'an, is to worship God (51:56). The Qur'an puts great emphasis on God's attribute of being our Creator as contributing to His being worthy of our worship, e.g. 'And why should I not worship He who created me and to whom you will be returned?' (36:22). False gods and

idols all have in common the fact that they did *not* create any part of this creation. The Qur'an says, for example, 'Do not prostrate to the sun or the moon, but prostrate to God, who created them' (41:37). It narrates the story of Abraham's argument with idol worshippers, who would devote themselves to idols that were made with their own hands, idols that did not speak, benefit, or harm anyone (21:51–67). In a similar vein, it points out the folly of the people of Moses, who worshipped a calf that they fashioned with their own hands, even though the calf could neither speak nor guide them (7:148). The shared inability among false gods and idols to create any part of God's creation is explicitly stated in Qur'an 22:73: 'Those you invoke besides God will never create [as much as] a fly, even if they gathered together for that purpose'.

God is also *Al-Adl*, The Just; the Qur'an states that He will judge every soul in a just manner: 'And We place the scales of justice for the Day of Resurrection, so no soul will be treated unjustly at all. And if there is [even] the weight of a mustard seed, We will bring it forth. And sufficient are We as accountant' (Qur'an 21:47). The criterion for God's judgment is the truth: 'And God judges with truth, while those they invoke besides Him judge not with anything' (40:20).

One more prominent divine attribute that I will mention here is the Islamic view of God as *Al-Hadi*, The Guide. In the most frequently repeated sura in Islamic prayer, *Al-Fatiha*, Muslims pray to God to 'guide [them] to the straight path' (Qur'an 1:6). The Qur'an frequently notes that God 'guides whom He wills' and 'leads astray whom He wills' (e.g. 2:142; 2:213; 4:88; 6:39 among several other verses). The collection of Qur'anic verses and relevant ahadith that discuss God's guidance are not clear about how much of a role, exactly, human freedom plays in people being on the straight path.⁴

In sum, the core Islamic understanding of God that emerges from a reading of the Qur'an and ahadith, with a focus on the prominent divine attributes, is this: *There is one God, the Creator of the universe, Gracious, Compassionate, Just, the source of guidance and the object of our worship.*

The God of Islam and the God of the philosophers

In sketching out the core Islamic understanding of God in the previous section, I said nothing about the three main attributes that make up the concept of God as understood by most philosophers of religion – the 'omniGod' of standard theism; these attributes are omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence. This is because these terms, or their respective synonyms, do not appear in the sacred texts of Islam. To be sure, these texts do mention God's power, His knowledge, and His goodness, but whether these attributes should be given the 'omni' prefix is controversial.

Let's begin by considering God's power. The Qur'an describes God as *Al-Qadeer*, which is often translated as 'The Omnipotent'. The key verse, repeated several times in the Qur'anic text, used to justify attributing omnipotence to God, states that He has 'power over all things' (e.g. 2:20, 2:106, 2:109; 2:148, 2:259; 2:284 in the second sura alone). It is far from clear, however, that this entails divine omnipotence, if by 'omnipotence' one means the power to do *anything*, or even *anything that is logically possible*.⁵ While God's power may extend to all things, there is nothing in the Qur'an to suggest that His power is unlimited or devoid of any kinds of constraints.

God is also known in the Qur'an as *Al-Aleem* (The All Knowing). As with those verses that discuss God's power, the Qur'an contains verses that refer to God as 'knowing of all things' (e.g. 2:29). Again, it is not clear whether this entails that God knows *everything*, especially in light of other verses that suggest a future *increase* in God's knowledge. Qur'an 47:31, for example, states: 'And surely, We will try you until we know those who strive among you, and the patient, and

We will test your affairs'. Now, if God knows *everything* but it is also the case that there is some future knowledge that God will eventually *acquire*, then this results in an inconsistency, unless, of course, divine omniscience is carefully qualified.⁶

And what of omnibenevolence? Although the Qur'an refers to God as *Al-Rahman* (The Gracious) and *Al-Raheem* (The Merciful), as mentioned above, along with other attributes like *Al-Barr* (The Beneficent), *Al-Afiw* (The Pardoner) (52:28, 4:99), there is nothing in the Qur'an stating that God is omnibenevolent. Indeed, there are certain verses that suggest God, as described in the Qur'an, is *not* omnibenevolent. To cite just one difficulty facing those who would insist otherwise, consider those verses stating that God does not love those who are unfaithful; more specifically, just to give a few examples, the Qur'an states that God does not love the unbelievers (2:276, 3:32, 30:45), the wrong-doers (3:57, 3:140, 42:40) or the proud and boasting (31:18, 57:23, 4:36, 16:23).

In pointing all of this out, I am not claiming that standard theism, or the idea of an 'omni-God', is necessarily *incompatible* with any hermeneutic of the Qur'an and ahadith. Rather, my more modest claim here is simply this: It is an arguable point whether God, as described in the Qur'an and ahadith, is an omnipotent, omniscient and omnibenevolent being.

Divine power, oneness, knowledge, creation and human freedom

One of the earliest controversies in Islamic thought involved Muslim thinkers debating the implications of God's power, oneness, knowledge and His attribute as creator, specifically in relation to whether these attributes of God left any room for human freedom.⁷ In a creedal statement attributed to Ahmed ibn Hanbal (780–855), one of the early famous Muslim jurists and theologians, we read the following:

Man's destiny is from God, with its good and evil, its paucity and abundance, its outward and inward, its sweet and bitter, its liked and disliked, its good and bad, its first and last [that is, every aspect of human life]. It is a decree that He has ordained, a destiny that He has determined for men. No one ever will go beyond the will of God (may He be glorified), nor overstep His decree. Rather, all will attain the destiny for which He has created them, applying themselves to the deeds which He has determined for them in His justice (may our Lord be glorified) ...

(Ibn Hanbal, *Tabaqat al-Hanabilah*, in Cragg and Speight 1980: 120)

Ibn Hanbal further states that Satan and others who disobey God were created for that disobedience. Similarly, God created those who are obedient to Him for that obedience.

This sort of theological determinism is arrived at by proffering a multi-faceted *reductio ad absurdum* of the alternative position of free will.⁸ Ibn Hanbal states,

Whoever asserts that God willed good and obedience for his people who disobeyed him, but that they willed for themselves evil and disobedience, and so did according to their own will, asserts that the will of man is stronger than the will of God (may He be blessed and exalted). And what greater lie could be forged against God (may He be glorified) than this?

(*ibid.*)

The idea here seems to be that humans have the capacity to frustrate the divine will if they possess free will; if God wills good only and it is humans who will evil and disobedience, then the possibility of the divine will being frustrated must exist. Such a possibility, according to Ibn

Hanbal, is incompatible with the Islamic concept of God.⁹ Another element of Ibn Hanbal's *reductio* of the free will position is that it entails polytheism, which is inconsistent with Islamic monotheism. To illustrate this point, Ibn Hanbal gives the example of a child born out of an adulterous relation. If it was *not* God's will that such a child be born, that it was born because of the free will exercised by those involved, then that must mean 'there is another creator with God. This is plainly association of another with God in his deity'.¹⁰ This particular criticism of Ibn Hanbal's rests on construing human actions resulting from free will as acts of 'creation'. If there are some human actions that God did not create, then we must have 'created' them. The problematic implications of this are twofold, for Ibn Hanbal: (1) there are some things (i.e., events) in God's universe that He did not create, which does not appear to be congruent with the Islamic understanding of God having created all of that which is on earth (see, e.g., Qur'an 2:29); (2) asserting that humans 'create' at least some of their actions entails that there are 'creators' other than God, which, in turn, results in the cardinal sin of *shirk*.¹¹ Ibn Hanbal goes as far as comparing this position to the metaphysical dualism found in Zoroastrianism.¹² Now, Ibn Hanbal's view here does seem somewhat strange, at least initially. If human beings 'create' events by exercising their free will, how does that necessarily elevate them or put them in close proximity to the Divine Rank? If human beings and God both have a similar quality, namely the quality of being able to create events, this does not necessarily mean, of course, that human beings are God or god-like. While this is true, Ibn Hanbal seems to think that *certain* attributes of God are *His alone*, such as being eternal, self-sufficient, worthy of worship, etc. This particular point is accepted unanimously by Muslims and indeed most theists in other religious traditions. What Ibn Hanbal seems to think is that God's attribute of Creator is also *solely* His; that to suggest human beings 'created' anything (that God did not) would compromise this attribute and consequently result in *shirk*. This cardinal sin does not just arise from a particular ontological view that postulates multiple deities. It also includes attributing divine-like qualities to things other than God.¹³

One final aspect of Ibn Hanbal's *reductio* involves appealing to God's (fore-)knowledge and the Islamic doctrine of *qadar* (divine decree or predestination); the latter is thought to be a consequence of the former. Qur'an 22:70 asserts: 'Do you not know that God knows what is in the heaven and earth? Indeed, that is in a Record'; and Qur'an 57:22 explains: 'No disaster strikes upon the earth or among yourselves except that it is in a register before We bring it into being – indeed that, for God, is easy' (see also 9:51).¹⁴ Islamic tradition holds that the reference to the 'record' is to the Preserved Tablet (*Al-Lawhu'l Mahfuz*), in which God prescribed all that will happen in His creation. Suppose, says Ibn Hanbal, that an act of murder occurs, but not according to what God has determined for the one who is murdered. This must mean that the murdered one has died before his appointed time (i.e., contrary to what is prescribed in the Preserved Tablet), which contradicts the theological tenet of *qadar*. 'Whoever concedes divine knowledge', says Ibn Hanbal, 'must also concede the divine decree and will, even in the smallest and least significant matters' (Cragg and Speight 1980: 121).¹⁵

There are at least a couple of philosophically interesting aspects of Ibn Hanbal's discussion of the concept of God and human freedom. First, as a theologian, Ibn Hanbal *begins* his reflections on free will and theological determinism with the concept of God, as presented in the Islamic sources, and then *proceeds* to arrive at certain conclusions about human freedom. Given who God is (according to him), human beings do not have free will. Second, Ibn Hanbal's approach to this one particular problem sees him elaborating on a number of divine attributes, specifically, God's power, oneness, His attribute as the Creator (of everything) and His knowledge. In this sense, it is similar to the problem of evil: reflecting on the existence, magnitude, and scale of evil in our world often has theologians and philosophers thinking carefully about a number of divine attributes, such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence.¹⁶

A more philosophical treatment of the Islamic concept of God and the problem of free will can be found in *The Book of The Five Fundamentals* by the Mu'tazilite thinker 'Abd al-Jabbar (935–1025).¹⁷ As with Ibn Hanbal's discussion, 'Abd al-Jabbar's views on the debate between the advocates of theological determinism and those who believe in free will involves discussion of a number of divine attributes, especially God's justice. The Mu'tazilites were the first school in Islamic thought both to incorporate rationalism into their theological discussions and to engage in a systematic working out of Islamic doctrine. The core framework of Mu'tazilite theology is provided by their 'five fundamentals', tenets which stated that (1) God is One; (2) God is Just; (3) God's promises and warnings are irreversible; (4) the grave sinner is neither a believer nor an unbeliever; and (5) the believer must advocate good and forbid evil. 'Abd al-Jabbar's views on free will and theological determinism are found under his general discussion of God's justice. There, he provides several criticisms of the sort of theological determinism espoused by Ibn Hanbal.

First, 'Abd al-Jabbar argues that, if human acts were created by God, it would render God's issuing of commandments and prohibitions (which God does many times in the Qur'an) superfluous; it would be akin to God commanding or prohibiting us to have a certain color, shape, or state of health or sickness. Second, whoever commits injustice and transgression must be unjust and a transgressor. It follows, then, that if God committed injustice and transgression (by performing immoral acts), He must be unjust and a transgressor. But, says 'Abd al-Jabbar, the Qur'an states that there is no disharmony in the creation of God, that all that God has created is good and that God disposes of all things in perfect order. Third, creating erroneous behavior in human beings and subsequently punishing them for it is a corrupt act, like commanding a slave to do something and punishing him for it. Fourth, the power to act, for a human being, must precede the act itself. If it were simultaneous with it, then the unbeliever would lack the power to have faith,¹⁸ which, in turn, would render God's command to have faith unfair ('ought implies can'). 'Abd al-Jabbar points out that, according to the Qur'an, God does not place a burden on anyone that is greater than what he or she can bear. 'Abd al-Jabbar turns next to the specific question of whether God wills disobedience in humans, as Ibn Hanbal believes, and argues that He does not. The argument is as follows: God wills acts of obedience and loathes acts of disobedience. It would be impossible, avers 'Abd al-Jabbar, for a wise man to command something he loathed and to prohibit something that he wanted. Now, in commanding us to have faith, God must will that we have faith; and, in prohibiting unbelief, God must loathe it. A wise man would not will something that is ethically wrong because that willing *is itself* ethically wrong. Hence, if God is all-wise, then He will not will insolence. Speaking more generally, '[H]ow could it be said that every corruption or injustice that occurred to humankind was willed by Him?'

'Abd al-Jabbar's discussion of theological determinism and free will is principally guided by his understanding of, and emphasis on, Divine *justice*; indeed, the Mu'tazilites used to call themselves 'The People of Unity and Justice' (*Ahl Al-Tawhid Wal 'Adl*). God's justice entails human freedom, among other things.

Understanding the divine attributes

In the Qur'an, God is described as being both similar and dissimilar to human beings. The Qur'an refers to God as a 'thing' (*shay*) (6:19), a being who has a face (55:26), with eyes (20:39), hands (38:75; 5:64), a leg (68:42), a spirit (15:29) and a soul (5:116). God is in the heavens (67:17) and established on His Throne (7:54). From the heavens, God will, one day, come to us in covers of cloud (2:210). God is also described as living (2:225), an attribute that is also applied to human

beings (30:19). God sees and hears, like humans who see and hear (76:2). Other verses in the Qur'an make it clear, however, that there is nothing like God. 42:11, for instance, says; 'there is nothing like unto Him' and 112:4 affirms that 'there is none comparable to Him'. The tension between anthropomorphic and apophatic readings of the Qur'anic descriptions of God resulted in three basic approaches to understanding religious language describing the divine: (a) anthropomorphic approaches; (b) apophatic approaches; and what we might call (c) an agnostic hermeneutic. A number of Muslims, such as the eighth-century exegete of the Qur'an, Muqatil ibn Sulayman (d. 767), took the anthropomorphic language of the Qur'an and ahadith literally. The Muslim historian Al-Sharastani (1086–1153) describes the view of those like ibn Sulayman as follows:

According to them God has a form and possesses limbs and parts which are either spiritual or physical. It is possible for him to move from place to place, to descend and ascend, to be stationary and to be firmly seated ... [Some believe in] the possibility of men touching God and shaking his hand; also that sincere Muslims may embrace him in this world as well as in the next, provided they attain in their spiritual endeavors to sufficient degree purity of heart and genuine union with God.¹⁹

In sharp contrast to such anthropomorphism was the apophatic theology of the Mu'tazilites. The famous Muslim thinker, Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'ari (874–936), the 'father' of the synthesis of faith and reason accepted by orthodox Sunni Islam,²⁰ explains their concept of God as follows:

The Mu'tazilites are unanimous that God is unlike anything else and that He hears and sees and is neither body, ghost, corpse, form, flesh, blood, substance, nor accident and that He is devoid of colour, taste, smell, tactual traits, heat, cold, moistness, dryness, height, width, or depth ... , and that He is indivisible ... and is not circumscribed by place or subject to time ... and that none of the attributes of the creature which involve contingency can be applied to Him ... , and that He cannot be perceived by the senses or assimilated to mankind at all.²¹

For the Mu'tazilites, seemingly anthropomorphic references to God in the Qur'an need to be interpreted allegorically. It is fair to say that the predominant view among orthodox Muslims is, however, to adopt an agnostic hermeneutic when it comes to understanding the divine attributes. One of the earliest formulations of this attitude is found in a statement attributed to the famous Sunni jurist, Malik ibn Anas (711–95). When asked whether 'God sits on the Throne', as stated in the Qur'an, he reportedly said in reply: 'The sitting is known, its modality is unknown; believing it is an obligation and questioning it is a heresy (*bid'ah*)'.²² Al-Ash'ari furthered this line of thought by construing the term *bila kayfa* ('without asking how') as a theological concept in order to apply it to the seemingly anthropomorphic verses that refer to God in the Qur'an. In one of his creedal statements, for instance, he writes: 'We [orthodox Muslims] confess that ... God is seated on His throne ... and that He has a face ... and that He has two hands, *bila kayfa* ... and that He has an eye, *bila kayfa* ... '.²³ The twelfth-century Hanbali jurist, Ibn Qudama (1147–1223), argued against allegorical interpretation of the anthropomorphic Qur'anic verses referring to God on the basis that such interpretation is a novelty in religion; that is, neither the Prophet of Islam, nor the early Caliphs or Imams practiced it. When faced with apparent anthropomorphisms in the Qur'anic text, two basic principles must be applied: (1) the principle that 'God should not be described in excess of His own description of Himself' and (2) accept such descriptions, as Al-Ash'ari urges, *bila kayfa*; that is, 'without being able to understand the how of them, nor fathom their intended sense, except in accordance with [God's] own description of Himself'.²⁴

Divine transcendence – a classical and contemporary problem in Islamic thought

In his controversial Regensburg lecture delivered on September 12, 2006,²⁵ Benedict XVI, now Pope Emeritus of the Catholic Church, made some remarks about the Islamic understanding of God's transcendence. In his lecture, Benedict XVI, referring to the views of the Catholic theologian, Adel Theodor Khoury, says:

[F]or Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent. His will is not bound up with any of our categories, even that of rationality ... Ibn Hazm went so far as to state that God is not bound even by his own word, and that nothing would oblige him to reveal the truth to us. Were it God's will, we would even have to practice idolatry.

By contrast, Benedict XVI maintains that, from a Christian perspective, acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature:

[A]s far as understanding of God and thus the concrete practice of religion is concerned, we are faced with an unavoidable dilemma. Is the conviction that acting unreasonably contradicts God's nature merely a Greek idea, or is it always and intrinsically true? I believe that here we can see the profound harmony between what is Greek in the best sense of the word and the biblical understanding of faith in God. Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: 'In the beginning was the λόγος'. This is the very word used by the emperor: God acts, *σύñ λόγῳ*, with logos. Logos means both reason and word – a reason which is creative and capable of self-communication, precisely as reason. John thus spoke the final word on the biblical concept of God, and in this word all the often toilsome and tortuous threads of biblical faith find their culmination and synthesis. In the beginning was the logos, and the logos is God, says the Evangelist ... From the very heart of Christian faith and, at the same time, the heart of Greek thought now joined to faith, Manuel II was able to say: Not to act 'with logos' is contrary to God's nature.

But, the concept of God of the sort endorsed by Ibn Hazm gives us an

... image of a capricious God, who is not even bound to truth and goodness. God's transcendence and otherness are so exalted that our reason, our sense of the true and good, are no longer an authentic mirror of God, whose deepest possibilities remain eternally unattainable and hidden behind his actual decisions.

In commenting on Benedict XVI's remarks here, let me begin with three points of agreement.

First, he is correct in connecting our 'understanding of God' with 'the concrete practice of religion'. There are many different ways in which this connection can be explained and justified. Here is one, with respect to Islam. For Muslims, the heart of religious commitment involves *iman*, which is typically translated as 'faith'. The word '*iman*' comes from the verb '*amana*', which means 'to be secure' or 'to put trust' in something. Etymologically and theologically, *iman* (faith) in God, for a Muslim, involves trusting Him (i.e. following His commandments, avoiding His prohibitions, etc.).²⁶ Now, there must be some basis on which we can at least *conceptually* ground such trust, even if there aren't any *evidential* grounds. The distinction

between conceptual and evidential grounds can best be brought out with the following example. Mary might not think it is *probable* that her husband, John, will ask her for a divorce anytime in the near future, because there is insufficient evidence for thinking that this will happen (a lack of adequate *evidential* grounds); nevertheless, it is *possible* that this can happen (there are *conceptual* grounds; it is possible for a married man to divorce his wife). So, the need for conceptual grounds on which to base trust in God should not be conflated with the demand for adequate evidential grounds. If there aren't even any conceptual grounds on which to base trust in God, then it seems that such trust (or faith) is arbitrary or perhaps not even 'trust' (or faith) at all.

Second, it seems to me that Benedict XVI is indeed correct in pointing out that the attribute of 'absolute transcendence' eliminates all conceptual grounds on which to base trust in God. It is hard to see what the basis for such trust in God would be if God is beyond any of our categories, including rationality, truth, and goodness.

Third, Benedict XVI is also correct in thinking that the acceptance of absolute transcendence (or something closely similar) is found within the Islamic religion. He cites the Spanish Muslim polymath, Ibn Hazm (994–1064), as ascribing this attribute to God. Ibn Hazm is certainly not alone in maintaining such a view. The famous Muslim theologian and philosopher, Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali (1058–1111), also subscribed to a view regarding God's transcendence that comes very close to its being absolute. In his *Jerusalem Epistle*, in which he summarizes his views about the concept of God, Al-Ghazali writes:

[N]othing happens in the seen and unseen universe (*al-mulk wa al-malakut*), not even a twinkling of an eye or an unguarded thought, except by God's predetermined purpose (*qada*), His power, and His will. He is the cause (*minhu*) of good and evil, benefit and harm, Islam and infidelity, acknowledgement and denial [of God], success and failure, rectitude and error, obedience and rebellion, association of other gods with Him and belief [in Him alone]. There is nothing that can defeat His predetermined purpose, and none to question His dominion.

(Tibawi 1965: 111)

This sort of absolute transcendence leads to an understanding of God as simply 'Absolute Will'. But, more disturbingly, since God is not bound by any of our categories, absolute transcendence leads to (divine) ethical voluntarism. God has no nature or essence in accordance with which He must act. Indeed, Al-Ghazali criticizes and rejects the views of the Mu'tazilites, who held that God is bound by what He has revealed to us in the Qur'an (specifically, His promises and warnings). According to Al-Ghazali, contrary to what the Mu'tazilites say, God can impose obligations on His servants that are beyond their abilities, inflict pain or torture on them for no previous offence or subsequent reward, etc., in effect, God may do with His creation as He pleases.²⁷ Like Al-Ghazali, Isma'il Al-Faruqi (1921–86), a well-known contemporary Palestinian-American Muslim, endorses and defends God's absolute transcendence as follows:

He [God] does not reveal Himself to anyone in any way. God reveals only His will. Remember one of the prophets asked God to reveal Himself and God told him, 'No, it is not possible for Me to reveal Myself to anyone'. ... This is God's will and that is all we have, and we have it in the perfection of the Qur'an. But Islam does not equate the Qur'an with the nature or essence of God. It is the Word of God, the Commandment of God, the Will of God. But God does not reveal Himself to anyone. Christians talk about the revelation of God Himself—by God and of God—but that is the great difference between Christianity and Islam. God is transcendent, and once

you talk about self-revelation you have hierophancy and immanence, and then the transcendence of God is compromised. You may not have complete transcendence and self-revelation at the same time.²⁸

To be sure, understanding God's transcendence as absolute can be given some Qur'anic justification, since the Islamic text never comments on the essence or nature of God. As Muslim philosopher Shabbir Akhtar explains,

The Koran, unlike the Gospel, never comments on the essence of Allah. 'Allah is Wise' or 'Allah is loving' may be pieces of revealed information but in contrast to Christianity, Muslims are not enticed to claims that 'Allah is Love' or 'Allah is Wisdom'. Only adjectival descriptions are attributed to the divine being and these merely as they bear on the revelation of God's will for man. The rest remains mysterious.

(Akhtar 1990: 180–81)

Can one conclude, though, as Benedict XVI maintains, that 'for Muslim teaching, God is absolutely transcendent'?

Here, I will disagree with the former Pope's views on the concept of God in Islam by pointing out that, as with Christianity or indeed any other religion, what counts as 'Muslim teaching' (or 'Christian teaching') is going to be controversial. Although ethical voluntarism is widely accepted among Muslims as a position describing the relationship between God and morality, it is by no means incontestable from an Islamic perspective. To begin with, ethical *objectivism* seems to be the more plausible ethical theory derived from a reading of the Qur'an. As George F. Hourani observes,

The Qur'an addresses a great many ethical sentences to pagans, especially in Mecca, who had not yet submitted to the *shari'a* of Islam. It uses terms such as *salih* [pious], *zulm* [wrongdoing], *adl* [justice], and exhorts them to be thoughtful and to reflect, to be honest in their dealings, not to be arrogant or uncharitable. The presumption is that a common ethical language is being used, understood clearly and in the same way by the speaker and the addressed parties. Such a language could not depend on their prior acceptance of the earlier revelations of Judaism and Christianity, since the Meccans had not accepted these. Many of the terms used have definite objective meanings in Arabic as far back as we can trace ...

(Hourani 1985: 27)

As an example of Qur'anic verses in which God speaks to people in a common ethical language, consider 68:35–36: 'Shall We treat The People of Faith like The People of Sin? What is the matter with you? How judge ye?' Moreover, as Hourani (1985: 28–37) notes, interpreting the moral language of the Qur'an in light of ethical voluntarism is simply untenable. And, explains Hourani, '[m]any ethical attributes are predicated of God, and these are impossible to interpret in terms of obedience to His own commands'. Part of the reason why ethical voluntarism was endorsed by Muslim thinkers (and others outside of Islam, such as William of Ockham) is because it seemed to safeguard God's power understood as divine *omnipotence*.²⁹ For if God's commands were issued in accordance with objective moral principles or values, such as justice, these would be a 'constraint' on His omnipotence.³⁰ This problematic implication is what Al-Ghazali seems to have in mind when he writes:

The Mu'tazilah maintain that [the imposition of duties upon God's servants] were an obligation upon Him because they are in the interest (*maslahah*) of His servants. But this is impossible since it is He who imposes obligations (*mujib*), He who commands and He who prohibits. How can He be liable to any obligation or be subject to any compulsion or command? ... [O]bligation in relation to Him is inconceivable.

(*Tibawi 1965: 112–14*)

But the dilemma between ethical voluntarism and ethical objectivism (if 'ethical objectivism' is understood as a reference to the existence of objective principles or values existing eternally and independently of God) is a false one. Justice and other ethical concepts could be, to consider a third possibility, part of God's *nature*, which forms the basis for His issuing commands to do good and avoid evil, for instance. Yes, the Qur'an might not *explicitly* identify an attribute or attributes with the nature of God³¹ as one finds in the Christian declaration that 'God is love' (1 John 4:8), but this does not mean that the Islamic conception of God, as derived from a reading of the Qur'an, necessarily *lacks* an essence or nature. The attribute of absolute transcendence is included (by some) in the concept of God as part of a *philosophical theory* used to interpret the Qur'anic text. By no means does that text explicitly state, or entail, God's absolute transcendence. The Spanish Muslim philosopher, Ibn Rushd (1126–98), rejected ethical voluntarism as a theory that was 'very odd from the standpoint of both reason and religion'.³² Referring to the Qur'anic verse that Al-Ghazali cites ('He [God] cannot be questioned for His acts, but they will be questioned (for theirs)' [21:32]), Ibn Rushd explains:

[T]he Almighty acts justly, not because He Himself becomes perfect through that justice, but because the perfection which is in Himself necessitates that He act justly. Thus, if this meaning is understood in that way, then it becomes clear that He is not described as just in the same sense in which the human being is so described. However, this does not imply that He should not be described as just in principle, and that all the actions that emanate from Him are neither just nor unjust, as the *Mutakallimun* [Ash'arite scholastic theologians] imagined. For this claim destroys what is intelligible to human beings and destroys the literal meaning of Scriptures.

(*Najjar 2001: 119–20*)

So, although the concept of God as an absolutely transcendent being may be based on a reading of the Qur'an and supplemented by some philosophical argumentation, it seems that both the hermeneutic and philosophical reasoning deployed to defend it are questionable. And, given this, it seems to me that it *is* possible to give some conceptual grounds on which to base trust (faith) in God; it can be argued, consistently with a Qur'anic hermeneutic, that it is part of God's nature that He is Just, Gracious, Merciful, etc.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I introduced and discussed the Islamic understanding of God as found in the Qur'an and ahadith, explaining that the concept of God that emerges from a reading of these sources is not necessarily equivalent to that of the 'omniGod' concept that most contemporary philosophers of religion discuss and debate. A good source of Islamic theological and philosophical discussion of God's attributes may be found in works by Muslim thinkers who addressed the issue of theological determinism and free will, some of which I detailed in this chapter. Another major issue in Islamic thought was how we are to understand the divine attributes,

especially as they appear in the Qur'an and ahadith. Of the three approaches that one finds in the classical Islamic sources, namely anthropomorphic approaches, apophatic approaches, and the 'agnostic hermeneutic', the latter was adopted by orthodox (Sunni) Islam. Attempts to arrive at a viable Islamic concept of God are important, as in any other theistic religion, since how we understand God will affect our (theistic) religious commitment (if we have one). I illustrated this by exploring the attribute of God's (absolute) transcendence. If the God of Islam is indeed an absolutely transcendent deity, then there does not seem to be a rational basis for trusting in Him. Such a concept of God can, however, be reasonably resisted from both an Islamic and philosophical perspective. Nevertheless, several questions remain that need to be addressed by those who wish to present the Islamic concept of God as a 'live option' for people today, to use William James' phrase. For instance, it would appear, as explained earlier, that Allah is not omnibenevolent; he does not love unbelievers, wrong-doers, etc. Does that render the Islamic concept of God inadequate? Or consider the problem of understanding the divine attributes. If these should not be interpreted or understood univocally, as maintained by Al-Ash'ari and many other Muslims, then does that render God completely mysterious? If so, is such a being worthy of our worship?³³ Addressing such questions will be an important part of a contemporary Islamic philosophy of religion.

Notes

- 1 See Swinburne (1977/1993; 1979/1991) for a defense of standard theism. For an atheist perspective that accepts standard theism as an understanding of God but concurrently rejects God's existence, see Mackie (1982).
- 2 Muslim scholars disagree as to the precise reason why the *basmallah* is absent at the beginning of the ninth sura. According to some, it simply was not part of the revelation given to the Prophet Muhammad. Other scholars think that the sura is actually a continuation of the one before it (which does contain the *basmallah*). And yet other scholars are of the opinion that content of the sura, particularly its beginning (which has to do with declaring that God and His Messenger have disassociated themselves from the disbelievers), did not warrant the inclusion of the *basmallah* at the start.
- 3 Compare with Mark 3:29 in the New Testament: 'But whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven; he is guilty of an eternal sin'.
- 4 Some verses in the Qur'an suggest that humans are the source of their choices (e.g. 18:29, 58:38–39, 41:46), while others suggest that God is the source of our choices (e.g. 6:25, 6:39, 6:111, 37:96). The fact that this sort of ambiguity exists in the Qur'an is acknowledged by the text itself (3:7).
- 5 One might, however, attribute a carefully qualified understanding of 'omnipotence' to God, based on interpreting that concept in a certain way. See Hoffman (2012) for further discussion.
- 6 For more on divine omniscience, see Wierenga (2010).
- 7 According to A.J. Wensinck (1965: 53), 'debates on predestination inaugurated rationalism in Islam'.
- 8 Henceforth, I will be using the definition of free will provided by van Inwagen (1975: 185–89). According to van Inwagen, free will refers to 'the power or ability of agents to act otherwise than they in fact do. To deny that men have free will is to assert that what a man does do and what he can do coincide. And almost all philosophers agree that a necessary condition for holding an agent responsible for an act is believing that that agent could have refrained from performing that act'.
- 9 One might see here rudimentary reflections related to the 'paradox of omnipotence'. See, for instance, J.L. Mackie's 'Evil and Omnipotence', *Mind*, New Series, Vol. 64 (1955), esp. pp. 210–212.
- 10 Cragg and Speight 1980.
- 11 See above.
- 12 Cragg and Speight 1980, p. 121.
- 13 This specific form of the sin of *shirk* is often referenced by Muslim theologians as the sin of giving God's Names and Attributes (Arabic: *Al-Asma was-Sifat*) to created beings. Thus, most Muslim theologians agree that human beings can never be given the names of God, such as Ar-Rahman ('The Most Merciful').
- 14 There are numerous ahadith that discuss the doctrine of divine decree. Consider, for instance, the following: 'The first thing which Allah created was the pen. Then, He said to it: Write. It asked: My Lord, what should I write? He said: Write the proportions of all things up until the Hour'.

- 15 As with Ibn Hanbal's reflections on God's power, there are some basic ruminations here on the problem of reconciling God's foreknowledge with human freedom. See Zagzebski (2004) for a more extended discussion. For a book length treatment of the problem as it arose in early Islamic thought, see Watt (1948).
- 16 See, for example, Keller (1989).
- 17 For a translation of, and commentary on, this work, see Martin *et al.* (1997).
- 18 Compare with van Inwagen's description of the rejection of free will: 'To deny that men have free will is to assert that what a man does do and what he can do coincide' (see above).
- 19 Al-Sharastani, as quoted in Zulfiqar Ali Shah (2012: 571).
- 20 As Fakhry (1999: 280) writes, 'The teachings of the new theological movement that al-Ashari launched was eventually identified with orthodox Sunni Islam'.
- 21 Al-Ash'ari, as quoted in Fakhry (2004: 58).
- 22 As quoted in Fakhry (1997).
- 23 Translation in Klein (1940: 50).
- 24 Ibn Qudama (1994).
- 25 http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html.
- 26 There is another Islamic concept that is similar to *iman: tawakkul* (reliance), which can be found in the Qur'an. 3:159, for instance, says: 'Rely upon God. Indeed, God loves those who rely [upon Him]'.
- 27 Ibid., pp. 113–115. For a more detailed discussion of this by Al-Ghazali, see his *Moderation in Belief*, translated by Aladdin M. Yaqub (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), Third Treatise. In that section of this work, Al-Ghazali makes it very clear that, in his view, God can essentially do whatever He likes, provided that what He wants to do is logically possible. This is the *only* constraint of God's Will and there is no other. As Yaqub explains, 'Al-Ghazali, like almost all theologians and philosophers, holds that divine will is constrained by the limits of logical possibility ... Al-Ghazali places no other constraints on the divine will' (p. 269).
- 28 Al-Faruqi (1982: 47–48).
- 29 As stated above, it is controversial whether the Qur'anic descriptions of God's power should be interpreted as referring to omnipotence.
- 30 Again, as stated above, God having 'maximal power', a qualified sense of omnipotence, is not incompatible with Qur'anic verses that refer to divine power.
- 31 This is debatable. Consider, for instance, the famous 'Verse of Light' in the Qur'an that states: 'Allah is the Light of The Heavens and The Earth' (24:35). This verse has attracted a lot of commentary from Muslim thinkers (mostly mystical or esoteric) attempting to understand what it means.
- 32 Ibn Rushd, 'Al-Kashf 'an Manāhij Al-Adilla', ['The Exposition of The Methods of Proof'], in Najjar (2001: 115).
- 33 As John Stuart Mill writes, 'If in ascribing goodness to God I do not mean what I mean by goodness; if I do not mean the goodness of which I have some knowledge, but an incomprehensible attribute of an incomprehensible substance, which for aught I know may be a totally different quality from that which I love and venerate, ... what do I mean by calling it goodness? And what reason have I for venerating it? ... To say that God's goodness may be different in kind from man's goodness, what is it but saying with a slight change of phraseology that God may possibly not be good?' As quoted in Hospers (1996: 226).

HINDU MODELS OF DIVINITY

Monima Chadha

1 Introduction

Wilfred Cantwell Smith – notably, in *The Meaning and End of Religion* – champions the view that religion is best understood as the living, vital faith of individual persons rather than as an abstract set of ideas and doctrines. He argues that we must abandon the tendency of ‘reification’, of ‘mentally making a religion into a thing, gradually coming to conceive it as an objective, systematic entity’ (Smith 1978: 51). The idea is that we must refrain from imposing an essentialist understanding on religious phenomena. This is particularly true of Hinduism; it is best understood as a set of heterogeneous phenomena both in the high-form and the folk-form. Any attempt to characterise Hinduism as a unified set of essential theses is likely to fail. The sacred texts of the Hindus, the Vedas, are variously interpreted by the six traditional Hindu philosophical schools. Even within a single school, philosophers disagree on the import of Vedic statements. The characteristic Hindu doctrines of *karma* and rebirth and the associated doctrine of *dharma* lack a fixed interpretation in the Hindu corpus. The *Mahābhārata*, a voluminous and arguably the most important epic in the Hindu tradition, constantly reminds the reader that the notions of *dharma* (righteous action), *sukarma* (right action), *vikarma* (forbidden action), and *akarma* (non-action) are subtle and hard to comprehend. If anything, the *Mahābhārata* illustrates that *dharma* is, as Lipner (1996: 121) puts it, ‘a polycentric concept, and its responsible implementation in a particular case is the result of a personal decision arrived at within the existing rational and other guidelines available’. Indeed, Lipner (1996) argues that ‘a dynamic polycentricism’ is the chief characteristic of Hinduness, although not of Hinduism, thought of as a religion. Lipner following Smith’s characterisation regards Hinduism (and other religions) as being intrinsically plural (1996: 111). Hinduism then, according to Lipner, can be best thought of as a family of religious traditions that resemble each other in that its participants share the distinctive attitude of ‘Hinduness’. This dynamic of polycentrism manifests itself both in the high-form and the folk-form.

Hindu intellectual traditions must be understood as standing for the collection of philosophical views that share a textual connection to certain core Hindu religious texts, the Vedas. There is no single, comprehensive philosophical doctrine shared by all intellectual traditions in Hinduism that distinguishes their view from contrary philosophical views associated with other Indian religious movements such as Buddhism or Jainism on issues of epistemology, metaphysics,

logic, ethics or cosmology. The Vedas are regarded as *apauruṣeya* (not borne out of human agency), but by the same token they are not the Word of God either. They are supposed to have been directly revealed, and thus are called *śruti* (what is revealed or heard), in contrast to other texts, which are called *smṛti* (what is remembered). It is commonly believed that the Vedas were composed over a near millennium from the fifteenth to the sixth century BCE. The Vedic corpus comprises four works, each called a ‘Veda’: the Ṛg, the Sāma, the Yajur, and the Atharva. The corpus of the Vedic texts is divided into four distinct sections in chronological order: Mantras, Brāhmanas, Āraṇyakas, and Upaniṣads. Even though at a first glance the Vedas appear unequivocally polytheistic, various strands of monism and scepticism find expression in them. These strands, in turn, find expression in the Hindu philosophical schools that encompass a variety of attitudes to God (and gods) ranging all the way from atheism to monotheism. Contrary to common perception, polytheism is absent from traditional Hindu philosophy in its high form. Most of the classical schools of Hindu philosophy do not accept a notion of God at all; if they ever do, it is in a sense very different from the Semitic tradition. God cannot intervene, for example, to pardon sins, or, as Hindus put it, He cannot mitigate the fruits of karma. For this reason, God and gods are considered omniscient and omnipotent, but never benevolent.

The six philosophical schools Nyāya, Vaiśeṣika, Sāṅkhya, Yoga, Pūrvaṃmāṃsā and Vedānta arose around the fifth century BCE, primarily to defend the authority of the Vedas under challenge from Buddhist, Jain, and Cārvāka (Materialist) heterodoxies. These schools specialise in different philosophical domains, albeit with significant overlap. The polycentrism referred to above manifests in the specific philosophical enterprises of these schools: Nyāya excelled in logic, epistemology, and reasoning; Vaiśeṣika in pluralistic metaphysics; Sāṅkhya in dualist (matter and consciousness) metaphysics; the Yoga in improvised techniques for liberation; the Pūrvaṃmāṃsā in perfecting the interpretation and defence of the ritually oriented part of the Vedas; and Vedānta in epistemology and monistic metaphysics. All these Hindu schools engaged in intense metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical debates among themselves and with the heterodox schools.

In contrast, Hinduism as a folk-religion has always been polytheistic. In the ritual-centred worlds of the Vedas, many gods were recognised but no one God was supremely located at the centre of the Vedic world view. The Vedic rituals relate to a number of deities, each identified with an aspect of the natural world: Indra (the king of the gods: god of rain and war); Surya (the sun god); Agni (the god of fire); etc. The Vedic Hindus had no idols, icons, or personal relationship to a single deity, the religious rituals centred on the sacred fire. The Vedic Hindus considered their offerings to the fire as the fulfilment of their end of a cosmic partnership between them and gods and ancestors, rather than as a means to propitiate the gods. Over a period of time, the older pantheon of Vedic gods lost favour and were replaced at the folk level by two new deities, Vishnu and Shiva, enshrined in the *Purāṇic* literature that flourished around the second century CE. This period also coincided with the building of temples, idol worship, and the emergence of various cults and sects. In addition, many regional and local deities were incorporated into the Hindu lore during this period: for a rural majority the most important deity is the village goddess (*gramadevata*), also called Earth goddess or Mother, who presides over fertility of animal and vegetable life, and over pestilence and disease. The parochialism of Hindu gods does not stop at small communities and villages; households have their very own family deity (*ghardevata*) who could be a male or female spirit and whose primary function is to protect and sustain the household. The simplest way to mark the distinction between the high form and the folk form is to talk of ‘gods’ for the polytheistic folk-level and of ‘God’ for the monotheistic creator referred to in the Hindu philosophical systems.

The brief description above illustrates dynamic polycentricism as an endemic feature of the Hindu religious world view. It should come as no surprise, then, that there are various models of divinity in Hinduism. Gods and terms like ‘the mighty one’ and ‘*īśvara*’ (Lord) appear frequently in the Vedas. However, the central Vedic concept is that of *Rta*: the natural and moral order that regulates and maintains the cyclic universe and everything within it. It is not until later, in *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, that we find the ingredients of a theistic world view. Here a personal god is acknowledged as the omniscient and omnipotent Supreme Being, and an attitude of *bhakti* (devotion) towards him is deemed appropriate. However, the notion of God is not made absolutely clear as the text oscillates between the Supreme Being as *saguṇa* Brahman (a personal God endowed with qualities) and as *nirguṇa* Brahman (Ultimate Reality without qualities); in other words between monotheism and monism. The theistic notion of God becomes important much later in the *Purāṇic* literature, and particularly in the *Bhagavadgītā*. Only then the aforementioned schools of Hindu philosophy – which could and did function without a God earlier – were compelled to find ways to incorporate theism that had gained currency in the wider folk imagination.

The relationship between the high form and the folk form of Hinduism has been a much debated topic among the scholars. Some see the folk practices as a consequence or residue of the grand theories of the Hindu philosophical systems; others, particularly anthropologists, see the popular culture and the regional traditions as acting more or less independently. In what follows, it will become clear that both these views are mistaken. Popular Hinduism certainly carved its own space with its many gods, specific rituals, and practices, but philosophers could not ignore the proliferation of rituals and gods, they needed to accommodate the practices. The late arrival of theism in Hindu philosophy suggests that it was the popularity of folk-level theism that influenced the Hindu philosophers to incorporate gods into their systematic philosophical doctrines. There is also lively debate among scholars whether Hinduism should be characterised as monotheistic or pantheistic or a blend of monotheism and polytheism (as well as pantheism, henotheism and, of course, some atheistic strands). Wendy Doniger, for example, claims that Hinduism is clearly pantheistic and monistic, and monotheism is a later colonial imposition (Doniger, 2010). This view is seriously mistaken: monotheism is strongly defended in later Nyāya philosophy (third–fifth century CE), a school that was also the first to develop a rational theology. However, given that this enterprise was driven by a need to account for popular polytheistic and henotheistic practices, it is striking that they ended up positing a far-removed monotheistic creator God. Finally a robust bridge between theory and practice – the high-form monotheism and the folk-form polytheism – was erected by the Vedānta philosopher Rāmānuja (about tenth century CE).

In Section 2, below, we take a closer look at the models of divinity in the Vedas. In Section 3, we look at later high-form theism, specifically of the Nyāya School – the only School that attempted to develop a rational theology in the Hindu tradition. Then, in Section 4, we explore models of divinity in the folk-form of Hinduism, and finally in Section 5 we examine Rāmānuja’s theses on theism that relate philosophical theory to popular practice.

2 Divinity in the Vedas

Ritual practice and discovery of self serve as sufficient and coherent centres for the world view of the Vedas; there was no obvious need for God as the centre of religious intelligibility (Clooney, 1999, p. 524). The connections between the rituals and the cosmos are discussed in the early parts of the Vedas, but these connections are fairly arbitrary. In the later part, the Upaniṣads are concerned with the deeper significance and meaning of these rituals. It is here that the power of the ritual is identified with Brahman, the underlying foundation or principle of the entire cosmos and all the beings within it (Flood 1996, p. 84). The significance of ritual practice in the Vedas is

tied up with the central concept of *Ṛta*, the cosmic law, which maintains the natural and moral order of the cosmos, according to the *Rgveda*. *Ṛta* is an abstract metaphysical principle that governs the cyclic creation and dissolution of the physical universe. *Ṛta* ensures that all created beings fulfil their true natures when they follow the path set for them by its ordinances, on pain of calamity and suffering. The gods are never portrayed as having command over *Ṛta*; like all created beings, they are also subject to *Ṛta*, and their divinity resides in their serving it as executors or sovereign protectors. Actions performed in conformity with *Ṛta* are the actions prescribed according to one's *dharma*. The law of *karma* is just a manifestation of the cosmic law as it applies to individual beings. At this level it is closely tied with the central theme of self discovery and knowledge in the Vedas. As a natural and moral theory, *karma* guides the action of an individual and determines the (re)birth (including *jāti* or caste), length of that life, quality of its experiences, etc. Consequently, the obligatory *karma*, or *dharma*, of an individual is also determined by it. *Karma* is literally translated as action, though it also means the results/residues acquired on account of that action. Simply put, the theory just says 'as you sow, so shall you reap'. But, and this is the distinguishing factor of the theory, the dictum is not restricted to a single lifetime in the history of an individual. Rather, it applies to an individual in the continuous cycle of birth and rebirth regulated by *karma*. The theory of *karma* presupposes that an individual (e.g., god, human, animal, plant, inanimate matter, etc.) is essentially an eternal, indestructible soul (*ātman*) which persists over lifetimes in different bodies and forms. This cycle of birth and rebirth is bound to suffering and the aim of the theory is to guide the individual to escape this cycle by achieving the highest state of existence, *mokṣa* (liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth). *Mokṣa*, rather than attainment of *svarga* (paradisical abode of the gods; equivalent to heaven in Hinduism), is the highest aim of human existence. The denizens of *svarga* too are tied to the cycle of birth and death: any *svarga* dweller can be reborn in a different plane – including the lower ones of the earth or the *narka* (hell) – and in different forms – including the lower ones of human, animal, or inanimate – depending on the quality of their *karma*. Since the moral and natural order of the universe is sustained by *Ṛta*, and created beings are regulated by *karma*, there is no requirement to posit a God for the preservation of order in the universe.

The Vedas do, however, refer to many deities, male and female, personifying aspects of nature. The most prominent is Indra, the king of the gods and the god of war, who wins battles for the Vedic *Aryans*. In addition, there is the *Surya* (sun god), *Agni* (fire god), *Varuna* (god of light; also the guardian of *Ṛta*), *Mitra* (god of contract to ensure regularity in the universe; also the sustainer of mankind), *Rudra* (the destroyer) and *Yama* (the god of the dead), and *Bhudevi* (the Earth goddess). All these gods are minor, themselves subject to *Ṛta* and *karma*. None of them have the power to intervene in *Ṛta* or mitigate the deliverances of *karma*. These gods are involved in rituals and sacrifices, they are honoured guests who descend to earth and invisibly seat themselves in their appointed places in the sacrificial field and join the sacrificial feast by taking the oblations offered to the sacrificial fire. In return, the gods give light, sunshine and rain, essential for sustaining human life. The efficacy of the sacrifice is determined by the exactitude of performance; the precision compels results. The elements of the sacrifice were identified with parts of the cosmos and the sacrifice itself was regarded as a re-enactment of creation and seen to play an indispensable role in its sustenance. The early Vedic attitude towards God is clearly sceptical, as is illustrated by this famous hymn (from the *Rg Veda*, 10.129, translated in O'Flaherty 1981: 25–26):

- 1 There was neither non-existence nor existence then; there was neither the realm of space nor the sky which is beyond. What stirred? Where? In whose protection? Was there water, bottomless deep?

- 2 There was neither death nor immortality then. There was no distinguishing sign of night nor of day. That one breathed, windless, by its own impulse. Other than that there was nothing beyond.
- 3 Darkness was hidden by darkness in the beginning; with no distinguishing sign, all this was water. The life force that was covered with emptiness, that one arose through the power of heat.
- 4 Desire came upon that one in the beginning; that was the first seed of time. Poets seeking in their heart with wisdom found the bond of existence in non-existence.
- 5 Their cord was extended across. Was there below? Was there above? There were seed-placers; there were powers. There was impulse beneath; there was giving-forth above.
- 6 Who really knows? Who will here proclaim it? Whence was it produced? Whence is this creation? The gods came afterwards, with the creation of the universe. Who then knows whence it has arisen?
- 7 Whence this creation has arisen – perhaps it formed itself, or perhaps it did not – the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows – or perhaps he does not know.

This sceptical attitude is carried over to the Upaniṣads (the last part of the Vedas), where a pupil questions the Upaniṣadic sage about ‘How many gods are there, really?’ The answer finally settled upon after much argumentation in the dialogue is ‘One’. This is not an endorsement of monotheism, because the description of the ‘One’ in the Upaniṣad suggests monism rather than monotheism. The Upaniṣad identifies the ‘One’ with *Brahman*, the ground of, and explanation for, everything that exists, without qualities or properties, and with nothing excluded from it. This ‘One’ is not conceived of as a personal God, even though the Upaniṣad says it may be variously called *Indra*, *Varuna*, or *Mitra*. In fact, in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upaniṣad it is claimed that the ‘One’ can be described only in negative terms, ‘Neti, Neti’ (Neither this, nor that).

The impetus for a theistic reformulation of Hindu philosophy resulted from its popularity in the wider community, especially with the expansion of Shavite and Vaishnavite movements into mainstream Hindu sects. But this theistic tendency was balanced by strong voices of atheism within the Hindu philosophical schools with some, e.g., Sāṅkhya, rejecting the idea that the existence of a God is required to render the world intelligible. Others, e.g., Pūrvaṃīmāṃsā, were unabashed atheists, and vehemently argued against a God-centred reformulation of Hindu religious world view since it conflicted with their central belief that the Vedas are the ultimate authority. There were also strong opponents of theism among the heterodox traditions: the Buddhists and the Cārvākas (materialists) who rejected God as an unnecessary and problematic posit. Nyāya School was among the first Hindu philosophical schools to succumb to the popular pressure to incorporate a God as a world-maker. However, their arguments needed to stand up to the scrutiny of fierce dissenters from both within and without. The Nyāya philosophy aimed at providing an argument which was rationally compelling and culturally credible: a tall task. We look at this next.

3 Nyāya concept of God

Nyāya scholars typically think of themselves as offering a rational theology. They accept ratiocination as one of the possible ways – among others, like learning about Him through the scriptures and the practices of meditation – of knowing God. According to the Nyāya, faith and reason are independent, but mutually supportive, paths for knowledge of the divine. The earliest discussion on God in Nyāya, and indeed in all Hindu philosophy, is found in the original Gautama *Nyāyasūtras* 4.1.19–21:

- 4.1.19: God is the cause; because we find fruitlessness in the actions of men.
 4.1.20: It is not so; because as a matter of fact no fruit appears without man's actions.
 4.1.21: Inasmuch as it is influenced by Him (God), there is no force in the reason put forward.

These *sūtras* are concerned with the examination of the theory that God is the cause of the universe, but the import of the terse argumentation is hard to interpret. Some scholars argue that the *sūtra* 21 rejects the need for postulating a God.¹ However, the earliest commentaries on the *Nyāyasūtras* (written in about 3rd–5th century CE), Vatsyāyana's (*Bhāṣya*) and Uddyotakara's (*Varttika*), suggest that this is an argument for the existence of God. *Sūtra* 21 is interpreted by Vatsyāyana as suggesting human effort is efficacious only with divine help, hence the reason put forth in *sūtra* 20 is superfluous; human action is necessary but not sufficient for production of fruits; therefore, we must posit a God as guarantor of the efficacy of human action. Vatsyāyana is thus putting forth a moral argument for the existence of God: the necessity of a God who dispenses the appropriate results of one's previous merit and demerit *karma*. For this reason, the early *Naiyāyikas* posit an omniscient, omnipotent and intelligent divine being. Vatsyāyana also comments that God does not *need* to act: He has already obtained all the fruits of his actions; but He *continues* to act for the sake of his created beings just as a father acts for the sake of his children.

Uddyotakara's commentary on the *Nyāyasūtra* 21 offers a different interpretation of the argument. He explains that 'things are influenced by God' insofar as He is the efficient cause of things. God does not create *ex nihilo*, the material cause of the things is available to God in the form of atoms of earth and other substances. This proof, also called the Nyāya argument from 'producthood', became the most enduring and developed argument for the existence of God in Nyāya Philosophy (Dasti 2011: p. 4). The argument simply states that the existence of a conscious agent, a maker, is to be inferred from the fact that earth and the like are produced effects.² It is best thought of as an inductive proof spelt out clearly by Phillips (2010):

- 1 Earth and the like have an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.
- 2 For they are effects.
- 3 (This is) like a pot (which has an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause), and unlike an atom (which is not an effect); where an effect, there an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.
- 4 Earth and the like are similar (fall under the rule).
- 5 Therefore earth and the like have an intelligent maker as an instrumental cause.

The argument itself does not mention God; it merely establishes an intelligent world-maker. The Nyāya argues further that only God can fulfil this role, since no ordinary maker would be capable of making the world. The maker must have knowledge of atoms, individuals, and *karmic* merit and demerit that are the material causes of the world. The complexity, nature, and extent of knowledge demands an omniscient God who possesses comprehensive and eternally present knowledge. The argument for the eternity of God's omniscience is based on the grounds that God lacks a body, sense-organs, and mind (the necessary instruments for cognition). His cognitions and thus His knowledge cannot be produced and, therefore, must be eternally present. Nyāya argues that God as the world-maker cannot have a body on pain of infinite regression; since bodies themselves are impermanent and thus in need of makers. A similar argument is used to establish God's omnipotence, since only a being with unlimited power can control all atoms, individual selves and their *karma* without a body. Jayanta in his *Nyāyamañjari* (written about 9th century CE) further adds that God always succeeds in whatever He intends and undertakes; thus God is always satisfied and never in need. The fact of omnipotence is also presented by Jayanta as

a reason for monotheism, since it is not possible for there to be several, potentially competing, omnipotent Gods. The Hindu atheist Mīmāṃsāka philosophers argued that the postulation of a creator God is unnecessary and problematic, and it interferes with the claim that the Vedas are the ultimate authority. Jayanta turns this Mīmāṃsāka argument on its head: after establishing the existence of an omnipotent and omniscient world-maker he simply uses an argument from economy to add that God is the guarantor of the Vedas; It makes no sense to assert that the world has one maker and the Vedas another, nor that there are many makers composing the Vedas; it is simpler to assert that the world and the Vedas are made by the same maker, God.

The Nyāya corpus on arguments for the existence of God is largely neutral with respect to any particular sect or tradition. Udayana in his *Nyāyakusumāñjali* (a treatise composed, in about the 10th century CE, to establish the existence of God) begins with the statement that the existence of God is accepted by everybody in some form or another: if he is a Shaivite, he worships God as Shiva; if he is a Vaishnavite he worships God as Vishnu; if he is attached to the sacrificial cult, he thinks God to be the being to whom offerings are made in the sacrifices, ... , if he is a Mīmāṃsāka (the avowed Hindu atheist) he thinks of the deities commended in the Vedic hymns as God; if he is a Nyāya scholar he thinks of God as a being endowed with only those of the above-mentioned attributes which can rationally be ascribed to Him; and, if he is a Cārvāka (the heterodox materialists and atheists) he takes God to be the being whom common people regard as God. This long list makes clear that Nyāya philosophers are certainly not sectarian: no religious sect or tradition or even the atheists are excluded on the basis of having alternative ideas about the nature of God; they are excluded on doctrinal grounds or on account of social and moral behaviour that accompanies such ideas. Thus Nyāya theology is strikingly pluralistic and inclusive.

The atheist Mīmāṃsākas rejected the idea of a world-maker on the basis that the widely held Vedic idea of creations and dissolutions (the *Ṛta*) does not sit well with the idea of a world-maker. Their main concern is that the imperfect and ever changing world does not give the impression that it would have been created by an omniscient and omnipotent God. Why does the perfect (omniscient and omnipotent) maker create a temporal, contingent and imperfect world, which is filled with pain and suffering? Jayanta's answer to this question draws attention to the distinction between God's infinite perfection and his guidance of finite beings in an imperfect world. Recall that God does not alter the moral order of the universe which is dictated by *Ṛta* and *karma*; He is simply added on to the non-theistic tradition as a guarantor to ensure that just rewards and punishments are doled out to individuals. The concern about the success of the inductive proof for the existence of God is echoed by Buddhists, who suggest that the Nyāya induction overreaches: it is grounded in experience of ordinary common artefacts and ordinary makers which cannot support the inference of a wholly unique God-like maker. The Cārvākas (materialists) questioned the proof on grounds that induction in general as a method of proof is suspicious. The *Viśiṣṭādvaita* Vedānta theists also question the inductive proof for the existence of God on the grounds that existence of God cannot be known through reasoning alone; reason must be supported by the testimony of the scriptures. But, as we have seen, the testimony of the scriptures is ambiguous on this issue. There are allusions to polytheism, monism, henotheism and even scepticism in the Vedas. Thus the appeal to scriptural testimony does not cut much ice. I do not want to evaluate the success of the arguments of the ancient philosophers in extensive detail, for they have been adequately covered in the contemporary literature.³

From a Western perspective, the Nyāya proof for the existence of God can be thought of as a hybrid of the cosmological and teleological arguments. Like the first, it aims to establish a fundamental, regress-stopping, efficient first cause of the universe. (The Nyāya God gets the atoms moving and combining in a certain way.) Like the second, it says that the efficient cause must

be an intelligent agent because it is not the mere existence of the physical universe but its complexity that demands an explanation. This point is widely debated in the literature: some scholars prefer to think of the Nyāya proof as an argument from design (Dasti, 2011, p. 5), but I agree with Patil (2009) that it is best construed as a hybrid. However, this hybrid version is unlike the hybrid theory of mind of Lewis (1994), which combines functionalism and identity theory in a manner that avoids the shortcomings of both the theories. Rather, the hybrid Nyāya proof for the existence of God inherits the weakness of both cosmological and teleological arguments. It suffers from standard rebuttals of these arguments when treated as rational arguments for the existence of God. Again, I will not discuss the failure of the rational arguments for the existence of God; they have been adequately covered in the contemporary literature.⁴ That the rational argument attempted by Nyāya fails to stand up against the concerns raised by their contemporaries should come as no surprise; there are no rationally compelling arguments for the existence of monotheistic Gods.⁵ How does the Nyāya conception of a monotheistic, omnipotent, and omniscient God fare in terms of cultural credibility? Nyāya tries to accommodate the polytheistic and diverse traditions by presenting a pluralistic and inclusive theology which implicitly echoes the Upaniṣadic philosophy, ‘That One appears as many’. However, note that their intent is to show that the monotheistic God is known in His various forms. The Nyāya are ontological pluralists – they believe in many real substances, qualities, universals, distinct individual souls, etc. They clearly reject the Upaniṣadic monism that there is only one reality, Brahman: God, atoms, individual souls, and merit and demerit are distinct existences. God is only the efficient cause of the universe, not its material cause. Therefore, the Nyāya theology does not speak to the prevalent practices in the Hindu, which were much influenced by the monistic and polytheistic strands in the Vedas.

4 Popular Hindu traditions and their concepts of god

The *Purāṇic* literature, including the great epic verses *Mahābhārata* (the popular *Bhagvadgītā* is a section in this verse) and *Rāmāyana*, are the texts that define popular Hinduism. Though originally composed in Sanskrit, they are written in a style accessible to the masses. The great epic poems are non-sectarian composite works in which many deities and many different modes of achieving salvation coexist. The Hindus, at popular level, have a Trinity of high gods: Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the sustainer) and Shiva, the destroyer (for re-creation). To these are added a plethora of secondary gods, each with a specific function and possessing a specific range of powers: Ganesha (the god of Success; son to Shiva); Parvati (goddess of love and benevolence; consort to Shiva); Saraswati (goddess of knowledge; consort to Brahma); Lakshmi (goddess of wealth; consort to Vishnu); etc. The Vaishnavites also believe that Vishnu can take on *avatārs*, specific forms (human, animal or human-animal) of worldly existence to rid the world of evil: *avatārs* are endowed with characteristics specific to their form. Even though there are specific sects or cults in Hinduism, singular devotion to one specific god is not required. Simultaneous propitiation of several deities is common practice and is accepted as practical and necessary, since different gods control different realms and have different powers. Though there are Hindu temples dedicated to a specific god, most have idols of various gods and *avatārs*. There are specific religious practices and rituals associated with different cults, for example the Shavites regard meditation and learning as most important; the Vaishnavites focus on idol worship and devotion (*bhakti*); the Shaktas (followers of Tantras) celebrate the body and its pleasures, etc. In the folk-tradition god is conceived of in various ways: the protector of *Dharma* (Krishna; also lover *par excellence*); the upholder of dharma and the destroyer of evil (Rama); the protector of Brahmins (Brighu); the slayer of demons (Kālī), etc.

The *Bhagvadgītā* is the first text to take cognisance of the fact that there are different forms of worship prevalent in the culture. It endorses four forms as means to *mokṣa*: *Karma-yoga* (the path of action); *Bhakti-yoga* (the path of devotion); *Dhyāna-yoga* (the path of meditation) and *Jñāna-yoga* (the path of knowledge). *Bhakti-yoga*, the path of devotion, is the most popular folk form of worship. It requires complete surrender to God in the expectation that his grace will lift the *bhakta* (devotee) to *mokṣa*. The idea is that the devotee surrenders her actions to God in the hope that God will guide her towards selfless action which alone, according to the law of *karma*, can lead to *mokṣa*. According to the *Bhagvadgītā*, actions are unavoidable, and in turn, generate positive or negative *karmic* residues that bind us further to the cycle of birth and rebirth. Since God cannot interfere with *karmic* law, the only way for the devotee to perform selfless action to achieve *mokṣa* is to think of oneself as a mere cog in the wheel of *karma* or a mere puppet whose strings are in God's hands, and pray for deliverance.

However, it was Rāmānuja in the eleventh century who gave a final theological basis for the Vaishnava *bhakti* movement which had gained tremendous popularity among the Hindus. Rāmānuja is very clear that he is not offering a rational theology; for him reason alone cannot establish the existence of God. I think the best way to understand Rāmānuja's philosophical project is that it attempts to offer a bridge between theory and practice, a much needed integration of the doctrines of Hindu philosophy and practices and rituals. He derives his inspiration not only from the Upaniṣads, but also from the *Bhagvadgītā* and the *Purāṇas*. This we look at next.

5 Vedānta concept of God

The *Viśiṣṭādvaita* School (literally, qualified non-dualism) within the Vedānta tradition is the only other (than Nyāya) Hindu philosophical school with an elaborate theology. Its founder Rāmānuja's system provides a philosophical basis for popular Hindu religious practice. The Vedānta philosophers saw themselves as interpreting and developing arguments in support of the Upaniṣadic doctrines, primarily their monistic strands. Śaṅkara, the most influential thinker in this tradition and the founder of the strict non-dualist (Advaita) School, argued that unqualified (*nirguṇa*) Brahman is the only thing that is ultimately real and that the individual soul (*ātman*) is identical with it; all plurality is only an appearance, an illusion (*māya*). Rāmānuja admits that there is non-duality (*advaita*) but this non-duality is *viśiṣṭa* (literally 'qualified') by difference; his doctrine is often described as 'identity-in-difference'. Rāmānuja identifies Brahman with God (Vishnu), holding that Brahman is, i.e., possesses qualities and can be personified as God (Vishnu). God is described positively as essentially possessing five characteristics: being, knowledge, bliss, infinitude, and purity; and also a host of other non-essential properties.

Rāmānuja put forward an organic conception of the universe using the analogy of body and soul: the body modifies the soul and has no separate existence from it, yet it is different from it. Similarly, the world constitutes God's 'body', modifying Him, yet having no separate existence from Him. The view is hard to understand. What does it mean to say that the world is the 'body' of God? The first strategy used by Rāmānuja is to quote from the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka* Upaniṣad (III. 7. 15):

He who dwells in all beings, who is within all beings whom all beings do not know, of whom all beings are the body, who controls all beings from within, he is your Self, the inner Controller, the Immortal One.

In his famous commentary, *Śrī Bhaṣya*, on the *Brahmasūtras* (also known as the *Vedāntasūtras*), Rāmānuja clarifies that the difficulty in understanding the phrase 'the world is God's body' is rooted in a very narrow understanding of the term 'body'. According to him, 'Any substance of a

conscious being which can be entirely controlled and supported by that being for the latter's own purposes, and whose proper form is solely to be the accessory of that being, is the "body" of that being' (*Srī Bhaṣya* II.1.9, quoted in Lipner 1984: 147). Lipner emphasises that 'body' in this sense is not necessarily a material thing, it could well be a finite conscious self (*ātman*) which is to be the 'body' of the infinite supreme Self (Brahman); the only condition that is to be met is that 'body' in this sense can only be predicated on a substance related only to a conscious agent. Thus the ensouler–body relation in this context is asymmetrical, wherein the conscious being or ensouler is in the dominant position. Lipner also clarifies that 'world' in the statement 'the world is Brahman's body' is to be understood simply as the 'aggregate of finite conscious and non-conscious beings ... especially of such beings in their empirically manifest form' (Lipner 1984: 148). The ensouler–body, Rāmānuja explains, is manifested both at the macrocosmic level (God–world) and at the microcosmic level (Individual finite self–body).

Rāmānuja uses three models to describe the relation between 'ensouler' and its 'body': the support/thing–supported, the controller/thing–controlled, and the principal/accessory relationship. The first model underwrites an ontological as well as an epistemological dependence between God and his body, i.e., the world, and the individual soul and its material body. The idea is that the thing supported (body/world) cannot exist, nor be understood, apart from its support (self/God). The ontological existence can be seen in the dependence of the body on the finite individual soul: when the soul leaves the body at death (as Hindus believe) the body disintegrates and ceases to exist. However, the dependence is not absolute, since the individual soul has no power to originate the body or avoid death; that power resides with Brahman or God (in liaison with the law of *karma*). It is Brahman or God as the ontological support that is responsible for the cyclic origin, sustenance and destruction of the universe. Brahman, in this sense, is the material and the efficient cause of the world; it does not depend on any other thing. Again, epistemologically speaking, though the body exists to serve the purposes of the individual soul to ultimately achieve liberation, this dependence is not absolute. Brahman is the ultimate principle for the intelligibility of the world and all its beings; the world exists to serve the purpose of Brahman. The second, i.e., the controller/thing–controlled model at the microcosmic as well as the macrocosmic level is invoked by Rāmānuja to ensure that free will (which is central to the theory of *karma*) is not compromised in the presence of God, who is conceived of as omniscient and omnipotent. The *Maitrī* Upaniṣad (II.6) refers to the finite individual soul as the 'charioteer' that guides and directs the material body to achieve its ends, just as the charioteer guides and directs the horses to reach his destination. At the macrocosmic level, God as the controller has the knowledge, will, and the power to achieve His ends, but insofar as His body is itself a conscious being, the controller cannot supersede the free will of the conscious agent; it is only in the case of unconscious beings that God is empowered to take full control. God as the guide and controller of the world (all beings) has full control over unconscious matter, but only partial control over conscious beings in that He can guide them through the scriptures and provide his grace, but He cannot take precedence over the delivery of the results ordained by the law of *karma*. The last of the three models, the principal and its accessory, emphasizes that the accessory derives its value from the principal. Rāmānuja explains the principal/accessory relationship by using the metaphor of a master and a slave, with the qualification that it is reciprocally beneficial: the master has the best interests of the slave at heart, and the slave enjoys, understands, and surrenders completely to the master. This model of the relation between God and world captures the essence of the *bhakti* (devotion) tradition which was characteristic of the Vaishnavite sect. The three models proposed by Rāmānuja are not meant to be independent, but are rather aimed at capturing various facets of the complex relationship between God, finite individual souls and material world.

Rāmānuja does not aim to offer a rational theology; his theology is aimed at explaining the puzzling view that monism and polytheism can co-exist in harmony. This thesis is central to the Upaniṣads and has a tremendous influence on praxis. Rāmānuja explicitly endorses Brahman as the ultimate reality but equates it with *saguṇa* Brahman which manifests itself as a supreme personal god Vishnu. Vishnu epitomises the One in many forms, in that he subsumes other divinities as his *avatārs* (earthly incarnations) and is the material and the efficient cause of the world. The view that God is the material and the efficient cause of the world is essential for *Viśiṣṭādvaita* ontology, according to which the material world and the plurality of conscious selves is real and not merely an appearance (*māyā*) caused by ignorance (as for the Advaitins). This distinguishes his view from that of the Advaita Vedāntins and the Nyāya, but at the same time it speaks to the Upaniṣadic monism as well as the popular belief that the world is created by God as his *lila* (play or sport). According to Karl Potter, '[R]amanuja's tradition can be said to represent one of the main arteries through which philosophy reached down to the masses, and it may be that *Viśiṣṭādvaita* is today the most powerful philosophy in India in terms of numbers of adherents, whether they know themselves by that label or not' (Potter 1963: 253).

To conclude, divinity in Hinduism is a complex phenomenon that draws on the compulsions of incorporating folk-form into intellectual tradition. The Nyāya rely exclusively on reason to offer a philosophically rigorous argument for the existence of God. It is no surprise that it fails to be rationally compelling, but it is striking that it does not stand up to cultural credibility: the monotheistic world-maker is far removed from the polytheistic and henotheistic practices. Rāmānuja does better in providing a basis for folk-practices and forms of worship, but insofar as his theology relies on scripture and extensive use of metaphor, it fails to be philosophically satisfactory.

Notes

- 1 See Clooney (1999, p. 527).
- 2 A more complex version of this argument first appeared in Uddyotakara's Varttika, and was later developed by famous Nyāya scholars like Vācaspati Miśra, Jayanta Bhatta, Udayana and Gangesa.
- 3 See Dasti (2011) and Patil (2009).
- 4 For an extensive summary of various ancient and contemporary versions of these arguments and their rebuttals see Oppy (2006a).
- 5 See Oppy (2006a).

10

CHRISTIAN CONCEPTIONS OF GOD

John Bishop

Most contemporary analytical philosophers of religion would endorse Alvin Plantinga's description of Christian belief as the belief

that there is an all-powerful, all-knowing, wholly good person (a person without a body) who has created us and our world, who loves us and was willing to send his son into the world to undergo suffering, humiliation, and death in order to redeem us.

(Plantinga 2000: 3)

There are, however, reasons for doubting whether the conception of God Plantinga here articulates constitutes an adequate understanding of the God of Christian worship. In this chapter, I shall consider some of these reasons, and whether there may be alternatives with better credentials. My aim is not to establish any conception as definitive, but rather to canvass the desiderata for an adequate understanding of the Christian God. A sound grasp of these desiderata, and the limits on meeting them within the compass of any single conception, may be the key to a wise understanding of who or what God is for the Christian religious tradition.

Plantinga himself envisages two kinds of challenge to his account of belief in God. In the first chapter of his *Warranted Christian Belief* he argues against the view that the God of Christianity is beyond the grasp of positive human concepts, and also sets aside the 'anti-realist' understanding of God as a symbolic social construct that focuses vital value-commitments.¹ Accepting positive content and realist reference for Christian belief is not enough to settle the meaning of 'God', however. It may be feasible to be a 'realist' about Christian belief *without* taking its core content as the proposition that there exists a 'personal omniGod', as I shall label the incorporeal person who is the all-powerful (omnipotent), all-knowing (omniscient), and perfectly morally good (omnibenevolent) Creator *ex nihilo* of all (else) that exists.

The 'God-role' and what may fill it

But how can it be a contestable matter who or what the Christian God is? The reason is that the concept of God is a *role-concept* – the concept of something that fills a certain role in the 'conceptual economy' of Christian belief. There may thus be dispute about what that 'something' is. It is useful to distinguish *the concept* of God – specified by describing the God-role – from

specific *conceptions* of what it is that fills the God-role. Christians may share the same concept of God, while differing over their specific conceptions of divinity, or, indeed, over whether any such conception is either needed or possible.

Specifying the Christian God-role: God as uniquely worshipful

How may the concept of God be specified in terms of the role that God plays? The various aspects of the Christian God-role have a single root: God is that which is uniquely worthy of worship. Christianity has it in common with the other Abrahamic traditions that God is the sole object of worship. These traditions have a deep fear of idolatry – of worshipping something unworthy. Nothing can be God unless it deserves worship. ('God' does not function, therefore, primarily as a proper name, but as 'a compressed title' with implicit descriptive content.²) To specify the Christian God-role it is therefore necessary to give an account of what Christian worship is.

Worship as a practical stance

Worship is an attitude with both factual content and practical implications. The object of worship is to be treated *in practice* as possessing the highest possible worth ('worship' is, at root, 'worthship'). Worship is not authentic without the actions and style of living that flow from it, however sincere the intellectual acknowledgment of its object's supreme worth.

What is the practical stance of Christian worship? A caricature has it that to worship is to abase oneself before a superior power one seeks to appease. In fact, worship may be given a broader, and less morally dubious, description in terms of three related elements. First, Christian worship gives absolute practical priority to God and the revealed divine will that we are to love one another as Christ has loved us. Second, Christian worship is Eucharistic: it gives thanks to God for, and on behalf of, all that exists, acknowledging God as the source and goal on which everything ultimately depends. Third, Christian worship trusts in God for help and salvation – for the forgiveness, self-transformation, and liberation that enables our joyful participation in the supreme good for the sake of which we, and all that is, are created. Worship thus entails renouncing attitudes and actions that are inconsistent with living lovingly, thankfully, and trustingly.

God's reality as uniquely worthy of worship, then, makes fitting a certain overall practical orientation. There is therefore *ethical* as well as metaphysical content to the idea of the divine. Philosophical discussion of the meaning of 'God's existence' has, however, been preoccupied with God's ontological status. I will review that ontological discussion, hoping to show the importance of recovering the ethical point of worship for a sound understanding of its object.

Anselm's formula and its interpretation

Anselm's famous characterisation of the divine as that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-conceived (*Proslogion*, Chapter 2) may be thought of as an attempt to describe the core element of the God-role – namely, of God as uniquely worthy of worship. In this formula, Anselm seeks to grasp the formal status the divine must have to be rightly afforded the absolute priority implied in worship.

Anselm's formula is widely interpreted as requiring that God have *ontological* supremacy: God is that than which nothing greater *qua being* can be conceived. This, in turn, is easily taken to imply that God is *a being* than which a greater cannot be thought. If rational persons, who act by intellect and will, are then assumed to be the highest possible kind of being, Anselm's

formula comes to imply that God is the supreme being *in the sense of the supreme rational person*. In this way, Anselm's articulation of what it is to be worthy of worship is thought to entail the personal omniGod conception of the divine: the being a greater than which cannot be thought must be a rational person, but with power, knowledge, and goodness so great that no greater can be conceived.

Yet this derivation of a conception of God from Anselm's formula will be regarded by some philosophers as falling short of authentic divinity. The charge may be made that the personal omniGod conception is anthropomorphic: God made in our image, rather than the reverse.³ To think of God as an incorporeal supreme mind, it may be complained, compromises the divine absoluteness, with God counted as an item amongst other existents, albeit an item of a unique kind.⁴

Properly anthropomorphic theism?

Some philosophers, however, defend the *properly* anthropomorphic character of any human conception of God.⁵ How else may we understand God other than by applying – through extrapolation across a vast ontological gulf – attributes whose meaning is familiar from our own case? At the same time, 'Christians ... take it for granted that God is infinite, transcendent, and ultimate (however precisely we gloss those terms)' (Plantinga 2000: 4). Conceiving of God in familiar personal terms and accepting God's 'otherness' are thus in tension: uncertainty in negotiating this tension is a major contributor to disagreement over the Christian conception of God.

Many theist philosophers hold that this tension achieves equilibrium in the personal omni-God conception, under which divine transcendence amounts to the unlimitedness of God's power, knowledge and goodness. Plantinga, in effect, *answers* the divine rhetorical question posed in the epigraph he chooses for his first chapter, 'With what can you compare me? Where is my like?' (Isaiah 46:5): 'Though you are unimaginably great, I *can* compare you to a human person'. This boldness is motivated by the conviction that the unsatisfactory alternatives are either to accept that God is a mystery beyond understanding or else hold an apophatic conception of the divine, characterised only in terms of what it is not. That conviction will be tested, however, by those who find the personal omniGod conception *improperly* anthropomorphic.

The Argument from Evil as directed against 'omniGod' anthropomorphism

Belief in a personal omniGod notoriously faces the challenge of the Argument from Evil. Hume's (1779/1993) classic discussion in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* has theological anthropomorphism (championed by Cleanthes) as the Argument's target, rather than theism as such – although Hume may well have thought that outright atheism would be the eventual outcome because a strictly non-anthropomorphic theism (championed by Demea) proves too religiously austere. This is not the occasion to consider the detailed dialectic of the responses personal omniGod theists make to the Argument from Evil. It will suffice to make two balancing, general observations.

First, and on the one hand, omniGod proponents remain confident that there is no inconsistency in accepting the reality of all the evil that exists while maintaining belief in God as a supreme personal agent who is both all-powerful and wholly good.⁶ From the perspective that accepts divine revelation, furthermore, they think it reasonable to hold that some evils do indeed appear pointless yet nevertheless fall within divine providence, whose operations transcend our limited knowledge.⁷ Finally, the resources of a Christian soteriology are deployed to

show that God can ‘defeat’ evil, and be good to each participant in ‘horrors’, through the wonderful redemption brought about in Christ.⁸

Second, and on the other hand, the sense that there is something obnoxious about theodicy persists for many.⁹ Some endorse the ‘Ivan Karamazov’ claim that any agent who could have, but did not, prevent (for example) the torture of children could not be morally perfect, no matter what ‘higher good’ was at stake.¹⁰ Others observe that it sits uneasily with Christian ethics to allow that perfect goodness might trade off evils for the sake of outweighing goods: could the perfection of the supreme person really require only a straightforwardly utilitarian yardstick, while created persons are held to a higher moral standard? And, if God’s redemptive success compensates for all suffering, there is still room for anxiety about the overall quality of relationship that God would then have with created persons whom he first sustains through horrors and then redeems in the joy of eternal relationship with him.¹¹

Doubts such as these, if sustained, would not justify atheism but only the rejection of belief in a personal omniGod. An argument for outright atheism emerges only if whatever fills the God-role *has to be* the personal omniGod – and that condition is not obviously satisfied. It may be possible, therefore, for Christian believers to *accept* the Argument from Evil against the existence of a personal omniGod, and yet maintain their religious commitment. The intellectual integrity of that stance, however, requires an alternative conception of God. What could such an alternative amount to?

A revisionist ‘anti-realist’ option

One suggestion is the ‘anti-realist’ one already mentioned: Christian worship is an ethical orientation, so perhaps the Christian God, properly understood, amounts to a – potent, even indispensable – symbol for the highest ethical ideals?¹² Talk of God would then be fictional, a ‘noble lie’. But such an anti-realist view must reject the strong tradition that holds it idolatrous to worship what we have ourselves constructed. Furthermore, Christianity understands commitment to its ideals as a fitting response to *how things are*, so Christians must at least accept *meta-ethical* realism – the ‘objective’ ‘mind-independence’ of ethical truth. God’s being a human construction may not, perhaps, itself entail that ethical truth has the same status. But the God who is the object of Christian worship is to be thanked and praised as ultimate source and goal of all that exists, and trusted unconditionally for help and transformative salvation: Christian understanding of these roles would need marked revision if God were strictly a fictional symbol. Short of such a radical revision, our conception of God must *both* fit God’s ethical supremacy *and also* meet the need for the object of worship to be ontologically supreme.

Classical theism

How could God be ontologically supreme and yet *not* be the supreme being in the form of the personal omniGod? God’s absolute transcendence was captured in classical theism by describing God as atemporal, immutable, impassible, necessary and simple. These attributes may helpfully be understood apophatically – as describing what God is not.¹³ ‘Negative theology’ protects divine transcendence, by emphasising that God is quite other than the existents of our experience which change, undergo processes, are contingent (have the potential to not-be), and instantiate general kinds (and are thus ‘composed’, in a certain sense, of ‘essence’ and ‘existence’).

While these classical attributes may be consistent with omnipotence, omniscience, and perfect goodness, they seem impossible to reconcile fully with the metaphysics of God as a supreme personal agent. (Divine simplicity seems decisively excluded: the personal omniGod belongs to

the kind ‘personal agent’ and there must be ‘composition’ in one who acts by intellect and will.) What *positive* alternative to the personal omniGod, then, may classical theism offer? It will not be enough to characterise God *purely* apophatically. A God who is not this, not that, and not the other may transcend ordinary existents only by failing to be real altogether!

Tradition-mediated conceptions

Positive characterisations of the divine *of a certain sort* are easily come by. Anselm had no doubt that that-than-which-a-greater-cannot-be-thought was, in fact, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ. There are multiple descriptions of the ‘filler of the God-role’ in terms of how God has been experienced within any given theist tradition. Appealing to these *tradition-mediated* conceptions is sufficient to rebut the challenge that the conception of a God who is not temporal, not changeable, etc. is, quite simply, the conception of nothing at all.

Will it be satisfying to leave it at that? One may ask of any tradition-mediated description of God just what it is, exactly, of which that description is true. The distinction between concept and conception makes only a *relative* contrast: any conception will consist in a description, and might therefore be treated as a more specific account of the God-role. But it would be a mistake to infer that knowledge of the divine will be achieved only when we know what it is *in itself*. Articulate knowledge of who or what God is will have to consist in *some* definite description. Would it suffice to rest with the descriptions supplied by tradition-mediated conceptions – the One who brought Israel out of Egypt, who raised the crucified Jesus, etc.?

Faith seeking understanding – and its limitations

The metaphysically curious will want to understand the metaphysical status of the referent of these tradition-based descriptions. But why should that concern philosophers of religion? One – lame – answer is that it is intrinsic to their philosophical calling to care about metaphysics. A better answer is that the urge to understand beyond tradition-based descriptions is not an external metaphysical imperative but *arises from religious consciousness itself*. As noted, the theist traditions have a horror of idolatry. Theism therefore generates a *religious* requirement for open-ended reflective understanding of the nature of the God putatively experienced as self-disclosing. Theist faith must indeed be ‘faith seeking understanding’.¹⁴ There are, however, limits to that understanding. God is incomprehensible – not in the contemporary sense that he is unintelligible, but in the sense that the understanding we should seek and may attain can never be complete. To act as if one were in possession of full comprehension of the divine would be high idolatry.

Need God be a person?

That high idolatry is avoided by the negative theological aspects of classical theism. A faith seeking understanding must nevertheless engage with the positive metaphysics of the divine – even if only to avoid attachment to inadequate theories. That requires entering the fray, in a suitably fallibilist spirit. What metaphysics may be proper to Christian faith, then, if *not* that of the personal omniGod? One important question is whether any alternative would still have to understand God as a person.

Relating to God personally is essential to Christian spirituality. Jesus himself relates to God as Father: that *entails* – many suppose – that Christians must understand God as a person. Accordingly, many find classical theism spiritually barren and welcome its evolution into personal omniGod

theism through discarding those attributes – impassibility and simplicity, especially – that do not match the reality of person-to-person interaction between God and humanity.¹⁵ (Personal omniGod theism is thus often assumed by analytical philosophers simply to be the ‘classical’ view.)

It is fallacious, however, to infer from the efficacy or even necessity of our relating personally to something that the thing concerned is a person. Well-designed computer or robot interfaces may require us to deal personally with machines, yet they do not become persons thereby. The same goes for institutions, corporations, and other groups, although these may at least be legal persons. These examples may seem not to carry weight for the theological case, however, since machines and institutions seem ‘less than’ persons. Anyone who denies God is a person is typically assumed to ‘de-personalise’, *ergo* diminish, the divine. Yet a non-personal divine may be advocated because a personal God is thought ‘too small’: what is urged is not a de-personalising, but a *trans*-personalising that understands God as transcending personhood, yet genuinely ‘imaged’ in personal existence and properly related to by created persons in interpersonal ways.

Analogical predication and ‘the image of God’

Since we may not simply ‘read off’ a metaphysical understanding from the mode of relationship with the divine that is essential to Christian spiritual psychology, conceptual space opens up for a conception of God that does not take ‘him’ to be a person. Occupying that space may nevertheless be problematic. Those with a non-personal conception will have to treat as purely metaphorical the vast number of scriptural, liturgical, and prayerful references to God in personal terms. But if the personal God is ‘just’ a metaphor, Christian belief cannot be what generations of believers have supposed. Proponents of a non-personal conception may thus provoke the same reaction as do anti-realists: the accusation that their conception of God renders the mass of believers misguided, and the truth accessible only to a philosophical elite. Christian catholicity must oppose such Gnosticism!

In response, it may be argued that personal attributes apply to God non-metaphorically, yet without God’s literally being a person, because they apply *in some analogical sense*.¹⁶ Properties whose meaning we understand from the human case may then, without equivocation, be attributed to a God who belongs to a quite different category. If this doctrine of analogy can be satisfactorily filled out, our entrenched personal attributions to God may be consistent with rejecting the metaphysics of the divine as a supernatural person.

This doctrine of analogy receives support from the doctrine of humanity created in God’s image. Our essential personal characteristics may be thought of – and this is *itself* an analogy, of course – as images in us of the divine nature. That does *not* entail that the divine is a person, since it is typical for an image to be a different kind of thing from that which it ‘images’.¹⁷ Personal attributes may thus apply to God by analogy without any implication that God shares an ontological kind with us. Ontologically, our personal attributes have their source in the divine. The trans-personal divinity they ‘image’ we will not fully comprehend. Yet, because those attributes ‘image’ divine reality, we may use them as the source for *analogical* understanding of that reality.

Meaningful analogical understanding depends, however, on *some* positive grasp of the analogy’s trans-personal target: only then may the justice of the analogy be shown. Otherwise attributions which *are* metaphorical will not be distinguishable from those which analogically convey an understanding of God’s properties. Speaking of Jesus as raised to God’s ‘right hand’, for example, is a metaphor for the perfection of his human participation in the divine. But when we speak of God’s anger at injustice, or God’s will that we love one another, we refer analogically to actual divine properties – though God no more has emotions or ‘a’ will than he

has a right hand. No proper ground for this distinction exists, however, without some positive account of the nature of the divine, of our personal existence, and of the relation between them.¹⁸ Appealing to analogous predication, then, secures personal language about the divine even if God is quite other than a person: those analogous attributions do not, however, convey in themselves an adequate understanding of the positive nature of the divine.

Attenuated personal conceptions

Philosophers who propose alternatives to the personal omniGod may be divided into two groups. The first group is unpersuaded that the metaphysics of the divine could differ markedly from the experienced object of Christian spirituality, and remains committed to a conception of God as a supreme person. The second group is convinced that the greatness of God transcends personhood, even though God is 'imaged' in persons and open to description by analogy with their attributes.

Philosophers in the first group in some way *attenuate* the personal omniGod conception in characterising their understanding of God. Open theists, for example, hold that God cannot control or know in advance how free agents will act, thereby limiting divine power and knowledge. Process theism further postulates a reciprocal relation between God and created beings in which the latter's creative contribution to the world's development is essential. Developmental theism speculates that God changes, developing from an exuberant primordial omnipotence into a morally perfect being no longer all-powerful.¹⁹

Such attenuated conceptions present a personal God that conforms to the living God of the scriptures more closely than the God of classical theism or even the personal omniGod. Some attenuated conceptions are also more in tune with paradoxical Christian ideas about divine power, reigning *on the cross* in the suffering of Jesus. Whatever makes this power – scandalously – the power that is authentically supreme, it is not omnipotence as construed by analytical philosophers. Conceptions of God that attenuate omnipotence, then, fit better with the Incarnation and *kenosis*, the 'emptying' of the divine in becoming incarnate – or, even, in the act of creation itself. Attenuating omnipotence has the evident further advantage that it helps with the problem of evil. (Conceptions that attenuate God's perfect goodness – which would also yield a ready response to the Argument from Evil – are, unsurprisingly, not common currency, although the God-character in the Scriptures acts on occasion quite immorally according to any reasonable moral consensus.)

Pantheism and its limits

How are trans-personal alternatives to the personal omniGod generated? What could have divine supremacy other than a supreme person? The Universe – all that is – may seem a likely candidate for ontological supremacy, and might count as divine provided it constitutes an overall organic *unity*. Christianity does see the Universe as such a unity, but interprets it as the unity *of creation*, and identifies the divine as Creator, the source and goal of that unity, rather than as the unity itself. The Christian conception of divinity thus transcends any purely pantheist conception, yet incorporates the pantheist conviction that the Universe is a meaningful, purposive, whole.²⁰

The divine as explanatory ultimate

That God is Creator is essential to the God-role. Only something that counts as Creator *ex nihilo* could be God, since God must be creator of *all* else, not merely transforming what already exists

but creating 'from nothing'. This aspect of the God-role is open to a more fundamental characterisation, however. God is the *ultimate* explainer of all else, in the sense that God's reality has itself no need of further explanation. The divine has to be a non-arbitrary stopping place for explanation of the relevant kind. But what kind of explanation is that?

God as ultimate productive cause

A common answer is that the kind of explanation in which God counts as ultimate explainer is causal explanation, where causal explanation explains an effect in terms of what produces it. God must then be the ultimate *producer* of all else, and therefore be, himself, a necessarily unproduced producer. For God to have this status he must be a *supernatural* agent: the only alternative is for the Universe to be its own producer, and this may be ruled out on the grounds that a cause must be distinct from its effect.

If a supernatural agent that produces the Universe has to be a *person*, then God's explanatory ultimacy will require a conception of God as an immaterial person, though perhaps not necessarily fully omnipotent. Yet the idea of a supernatural personal agent who produces the Universe runs into difficulty. First, its own existence will need, for some non-arbitrary reason, not to require causal explanation, and so must be necessary. But some will either doubt the coherence of the idea of a concrete entity that cannot but exist or else suspect that appeal to this notion is *ad hoc*. Second, a supernatural personal cause produces independently of any material medium; understanding how this is a coherent possibility faces difficulties familiar from interactionist mind-body dualism. Third, the causal influence of the ultimate producer of all that exists will be pervasive and perhaps too dominating. If the ultimate producer is itself a person, how can created persons be significantly free in their decisions and actions? The Argument from Evil threatens, of course, since the ultimate producer seems complicit in all evil doing and suffering. This third set of problems, however, may prove less serious on conceptions of the personal creator that relax the 'omni-' attributes, and place God's creative activity at some distance from the actions of free creatures.

Could the unproduced producer of all be other than a supernatural person? An influential tradition conceives of God as 'Existence itself' or 'Being'. When Moses encounters God in the burning bush and asks what he is to say when the Israelites ask for God's name, God replies: 'I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: "I am has sent me to you"' (Exodus 3:14). The conception of God as Being is often taken to be the classical positive conception of the divine, since Aquinas says that God is *ipsum esse subsistens*. Existence itself, however, seems to be either a universal or another name for all that exists; in neither case does it seem that Existence itself could be the unproduced producer. Tillich describes God as 'the Ground of Being',²¹ but this serves only as a placeholder for a non-personal creator until a positive account of this 'ground' is given.

God as 'the ultimate point'

To think of God's ultimacy as belonging to the productive causal order may be misleading, however. That interpretation brings theological explanation uncomfortably close to natural scientific explanation, exposing theism to being misunderstood as bad scientific theory. If God is the ultimate productive cause, scientific explanations are not complete in their own domain, since an added supernatural cause will be required for them to 'terminate'. Yet there seems little *theoretical* gain in appeal to the supernatural over the 'naturalist' acceptance that scientific explanations rest on foundational facts about the laws of nature.

But theological explanation does not aim to add to theoretical scientific explanation: it purports to explain what is wholly outside the scientific domain. To explain existence as God's creation is to explain it as a unity that exists for a purpose and is, in that sense, a meaningful whole. Furthermore, it is to explain it as having and achieving a *supremely good* purpose. God's reality is thus explanatorily ultimate as that which makes meaningful human (and, indeed, all) existence and does not stand in need of anything beyond itself to give purpose to its own reality. God is the necessarily final answer to the question 'what's the point?': an answer that, according to Christianity, holds firm in the face of everything that seems to annihilate worth.

This account of theological explanation restores the ethical to its place, but not by displacing the ontological. It is God's *reality* that explains why anything exists – an explanation in terms not merely of causality, but of what gives the Universe worth, and makes it worthwhile *for* its human creatures.²² God's reality thus makes fitting the responses of thankfulness, hope and trust at the core of the ethos of Christian worship.

What is 'salvation'?

God also has *salvific* ultimacy: human salvation comes from God alone. Salvation is salvation from *sin*, understood as the condition that blocks our wholehearted commitment to and proper enjoyment of the ideal of supreme goodness which, according to Christianity, is to live in *agape*, love. 'Sins', in the plural, are transgressions against the law of love. Sin itself is a condition at the root of moral failure, and 'original' in the sense that humans are intrinsically disposed to it. At the individual level, sin at its core is the tendency to egotism, to behave as if one were oneself the controlling authority over one's life and the centre of what matters most. Some validate this egotism by rejecting love as a remote ideal whose law only a fool would try to live by 'in the real world'. Others recognise love's concrete worth, yet sin persists for them as despair at the world's moral indifference, with the rain (and worse) falling on the just and the unjust alike. Sin is also understood as a *collective, ecological*, and even *cosmic* condition, cutting off nations, humanity, and all creation from full enjoyment of the good.

God is the one who saves from sin. At the individual level, this requires that God's reality makes it irrational to treat love as a remote ideal, whether in self-assertive egotism or with moralising despair. God also enables individuals to be 'born again' as selves liberated from selfishness and false self-reliance who can therefore love freely.²³

How can a personal God be both creator and saviour?

When God is understood as a person, filling both the creator and the saviour role creates tension. As creator, God must have presided over the origination of the sin from which he saves his creatures. If God's overall creative power can somehow be coherently limited so that any implication that God is personally responsible for sin is blocked, it may then be doubtful whether God has power enough to achieve a worthwhile salvation. For example, if – as process theism suggests – we share actively in the grand drama of the developing creation, and God suffers with us, what is the 'cash value' of its being *God* who suffers with us? Could a God who lacks final control be the saviour who ensures the victory of the good?

A lot depends on how wide and full 'salvation' is supposed to be: there has, of course, been much Christian controversy over this question. Its importance here is its bearing on the fitness of a given conception of God to fill the saviour-role, since what that requires will vary according to different notions of the nature and extent of salvation. If, for example, salvation has to be universal, with all 'participants in horrors' – perpetrators as well as victims – finally

reconciled and redeemed in the joy of eternal relationship with God,²⁴ then a personal God would surely have to be the omniGod. Indeed, an omnipotent person with the power to save all would be unjust or at least mean-spirited if he did not – and morally monstrous if he deliberately pre-destined only an ‘elect’ for salvation. A ‘Calvinist’ picture in which only some are saved under the providence of a wholly good creator would make more moral sense, however, if the personal God’s power to save were somehow limited (as on a process theological view, for example – though Calvin held no such view, of course: he was a classical theist).

A non-personal saviour?

How could a non-personal conception of God fill the saviour role? An interesting recent proposal in the ‘theology of Being’ tradition that explicitly recognises the saviour role is due to Mark Johnston. For God, the Highest One, ‘to be of salvific interest,’ Johnston (2009: 94) argues, it must be the ‘common source’ of transformative grace. Submission to God’s grace will be necessary if we are to live well, acquiring the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love that are needed properly to come to terms with the ‘large scale structural defects in human life that no amount of psychological adjustment or practical success can free us from’ (ibid. 15).²⁵ Johnston proposes a Heideggerian ‘process pantheism’, according to which the Highest One is identified with ‘the outpouring of Existence Itself by way of its exemplification in ordinary existents for the sake of the self-disclosure of Existence Itself’ (ibid. 116). Instead of God as Being, then, God is the *activity* of Being.

How could the ‘outpouring’ of Existence itself be salvific? It is, Johnston says, ‘a process that makes up all of reality, and, arguably, to affirm this process and thoroughly identify with it is to truly love God’ (ibid. 116). ‘Affirming’ and ‘identifying with’ Existence’s outpouring amount to *accepting* it in a positive spirit: but God’s reality is supposed to make that response – and, indeed, the more complex one of hopeful commitment to the ideals of love – *the apt and fitting response* to how things are. It is hard to see how ‘things doing their thing’ (if that is a fair gloss) can be enough for that, even when it is added that they do their thing ‘in order to’ make themselves known.

God as the Good

The Christian view of ‘Being’ is that it ‘does its thing’ ultimately for the sake of the Good: our human existence is meaningful through its potential for participation, by divine grace, in realising the Good. Further content for a conception of God in the ‘theology of Being’ tradition may thus be supplied by emphasising *the purpose* for which Being discloses itself, namely for the sake of the Good.

There is a Platonic tradition that has influenced Christianity that directly identifies God with the Good. Classical theism holds that God *is* his goodness (a consequence of divine simplicity). Could this understanding qualify as an adequate Christian conception?

Goodness itself is a universal: how, then, could it fit God’s role as creator? John Leslie has defended the coherence of *axiarchism*, the thesis that the Universe exists because it is ethically required, taking his cue from Plato’s assertion that the Good, itself ‘beyond existence’, is ‘what gives existence to things’ (*Republic*, Book VI).²⁶ Axiarchism has to hold that the Universe is *overall* good despite suffering and sin, a stance open to ethical critique as arguably encouraging in its adherents too quiescent an attitude to evil. Nevertheless, since it is good that the Universe should be hospitable to the good, making the hopeful pursuit of the highest ideals reasonable and accessible through ‘overcoming self’, once it is conceded that, thanks to axiarchism, the Good

can play the creator role it seems it must also be accepted that it plays the saviour role (salvation from complacency in the face of suffering and injustice will thus be accommodated on this conception as much as on any other).

Beyond productive causality?

The principle that a thing's ethical requiredness can produce its actual existence seems far-fetched, however: ethical requiredness explains that it *would be* good for the required thing to exist, but more is needed, surely, to explain how it *actually* comes to be if it does? It may be a mistake, however, to assume that the Christian theological explanation of the Universe's existence must be an explanation that posits an ultimate *productive cause* of all that exists.

As already argued, divine ultimacy is *ontoethical*: God is a greater than which cannot be conceived *both ontologically and ethically*. But perhaps ontological greatness is not equivalent to – and may even necessarily transcend – absolute priority in the order of productive causality? Theological explanation of the Universe will be bound to have *some* unique feature, and the present question is whether God's having the status of the necessarily existent unproduced producer is the right kind of uniqueness. It is, of course, a constraint on the theological explanation of the Universe that it be sufficiently analogous to familiar forms of explanation to be intelligible *as* an explanation. Build too transcendent a uniqueness into your theological explanation and you will be bound to sacrifice intelligibility. Nevertheless, the idea that the Universe's existence might ultimately be explained in terms of the Good may be intelligible even though the Good is not the kind of thing that could be the *productive* cause of the Universe, or, indeed, of anything. But how so?

How can the Good, the ethically ultimate, also be ontologically ultimate? How else could the Universe's *existence* be explained by the Good, if this explanation does *not* proceed by citing the Universe's ultimate producer? To recognise something as good, as worthwhile, is to *make sense of it from the perspective of our practical engagement with the world* ('practical' is used here in the broadest sense that includes contemplative engagement). The Genesis creation stories are presented in terms of creative production (of a unique kind, where the creator says 'let it be' and it is), but their real force is to make sense of the Universe as a worthwhile and well-ordered cosmos with which finite agents may engage to their own fulfilment. (In Genesis 1, 'And God saw that it was good' is repeated following the stage by stage accounts of creation, and the chapter's final verse concludes: 'God saw all that he had made, and it was very good'.)

A 'euteleological' conception

Seeing the Universe as 'very good', and hospitable to human commitment to the Good, may be vital for the stance of the engaged agent. But it seems a matter of *placing an interpretation* on the world, rather than *explaining* its existence. Perhaps, then, explanation is not – at this level – what is important? Alternatively, perhaps something may be added to the interpretation that yields an explanation without recourse to an ultimate productive cause? For, Christianity is not only an invitation to see one's engagement with the world in a positive light, it is a proclamation, based on a claim to revelation, that the world *makes reasonable* the hopeful pursuit of the highest ethical ideal, revealed in Christ as the 'law' of love.

Christianity understands God as the end, or purpose, of the Universe, and not only as its source: God is 'alpha and omega'. A teleological addition is thus fitting: it is not just that the Universe is good, it has the good as its *telos*, and it exists *for the sake of* the good. Of course, something may be directed upon an end, yet not achieve it. The theological explanation of the

Universe cannot, then, amount just to the fact that the Universe has the Good as its end. If the Universe's end, the Good, is actually realised, however, then a *euteleological* explanation of it becomes available: the Universe exists so that the Good may be realised and ultimately only because the Good *is* realised. (Adding the 'eu-' prefix thus connotes the 'good news' that the Good is not a mere ideal but *is* fully realised and so realisable within the Universe.)

Many will suppose that the Universe could be directed upon an end only if some agent so directs it with that end in mind: if that is correct, attending to teleology will return us to a personal conception of the divine as ultimate producer. But the euteleological proposal maintains that the reduction of teleological to productive causal explanation does not apply to its explanation of the Universe. Here, then, is a different way in which theological explanation of the Universe could be unique, and, arguably, still bear enough similarity to teleological explanations generally to remain intelligible, if not fully comprehensible (as noted, no religiously authentic theological explanation could be fully comprehensible). On the euteleological conception, then, God's reality is identified with the Universe's being directed upon the Good as its *telos*, and existing *ex nihilo* because it realises that ultimate, most final, end.

'God is love'

Christianity holds that, in Christ, the Incarnate Word, the true character of the divine and the fullness of what it is to be truly human are revealed. God is revealed as love, with Christ's living and dying showing the pattern of that love and its power. That God is love – where this is more than metonymy for God's being a supremely loving person – deserves serious philosophical consideration as a Christian conception of the divine. This conception fits well with what is perhaps the most comprehensible interpretation of the distinctive Christian doctrine of the Trinity, the 'social' interpretation, according to which what is primarily divine is the loving society into which the persons of the Trinity enter.²⁷ God may then be understood as the eternal love that unites the Trinitarian persons, with created persons ultimately destined by divine grace for 'divinisation' in the sense of participating in that eternal love.

Christian doctrines of Incarnation (the divine as manifest in its full character within the natural Universe), of the Trinity, and of God's nature revealed as love, place constraints on what can fill the Christian God-role. Philosophical accounts of the Christian God often do not place much weight on meeting these constraints, or else suppose that doing so is straightforward. Reconciling the dominant personal omniGod conception of the divine with viable interpretations of these doctrines may not be easy, however. Can God really be a personal substance and also consist of three such substances?²⁸ How could the supernatural 'person without a body' be incarnate *as fully divine* in Jesus? How could a personal God *be* love, if that does indeed go beyond being loving?

A 'God is love' theology may do better in accommodating doctrines such as the Trinity and the Incarnation. But can love fill either the creator or the saviour roles essential for the God of Christian worship? Will those roles not require recourse to a supernatural personal agent? Perhaps not necessarily. With love identified as the supreme good, both the axiarchic and the euteleological conceptions offer a way of interpreting how love itself, in the absence of supernatural agency, could be creator *ex nihilo*. (Note, incidentally, that under the euteleological conception the Universe's existence is explained in terms of love as its *telos* only if love is actually realised in the Universe – so this conception of the divine has incarnation as a logical consequence.)

As to the saviour role, Christian revelation holds that true spiritual power is the power of love, victorious in the risen Christ, and poured out on the Church and 'all flesh' in the coming

of the Holy Spirit. It is love as manifest in Christ that has the power to transform our selfishness and despair and enable our participation in its own full reality: love thus has a power to reproduce itself. Whether love's fecund power could, without supernatural intervention, be power *enough* to bring a worthwhile salvation may be moot, however: but those who dare to think so may be able to build 'God is love' into a genuine alternative to conceptions of the divine as a supreme supernatural personal agent.

It is often said that, though God is love, we must beware of holding that love is God. That observation may be intended to alert us to the meaning of 'love' in this context: *agape*, love after the pattern of Christ, which can be understood only open-endedly in lived experience. But the observation may also convey that one should not *identify* actual cases of *agape* in action and relationship – even their historical sum – with the divine, and it might be objected that a naturalist (in the sense of 'anti-supernaturalist') 'God is love' theology must make just such a problematic identification. That trap could be avoided, however, by emphasising the distinction between the divine reality and its manifestations or incarnations. While the divine – love – is indeed fully realised in natural states of affairs within the Universe, God's reality may be understood as transcending any of its incarnations. Again, recourse to the supernatural beckons, but may be avoided if divine transcendence is understood (as on a euteleological conception) as consisting in the Universe's directedness upon, and existing in virtue of, the realisation of *agape*, the Good.

Conclusion

Philosophers who inquire into Christianity will find its *concept* of God secure enough. God is the sole proper object of worship, Creator *ex nihilo*, and the One who alone saves from sin and death. It is, however, controversial whether what fills the Christian God-role has to be the personal omniGod. What does fill that unique role will not be fully comprehensible, yet a faith that seeks understanding, as any faith that fears idolatry must, stands in need of an intelligible positive conception of the divine. To be adequate, such a conception must meet the need for both ontological *and* ethical supremacy. I have suggested that, with the divine reality recognised as making reasonable hopeful and steadfast commitment to living in accordance with the ideal of Christian love, alternatives to the conception of God as a person in supernatural control of the Universe do open up, not least the conception of God *as that love itself*, understood as the realised *telos* for the sake of which the Universe exists.

That the world is God's good creation, hospitable to commitment to the highest ethical ideals, comes as good news. Christian faith accepts this good news in the face of the contrary evidence provided by evil – especially the evil done by political and religious institutions (that Jesus' public death was religiously sponsored and politically authorised is essential to its Christian significance). Belief in God under *any* viable Christian conception, then, will be open to the objection that it is unreasonable given the facts of evil. A reflective Christian's decision to endorse a given conception of God may be influenced by several kinds of consideration, including all those canvassed here. But one, I suggest, is paramount: namely, that God under that conception may be judged wholly good according to our best ethical understanding, itself informed – though not solely determined – by the moral content of Christian revelation.

Notes

- 1 Another kind of challenge is to the very coherence of the conception of God specified in Plantinga's description. For a thorough inquiry into that question, see Swinburne (1977/1993).

- 2 See Johnston (2009: 6). Johnston notes the corollary that one cannot tell by introspection whether one believes in God: that which one *takes* to be God might, in fact, be an idol.
- 3 Feminist critique goes further, suggesting that the personal omniGod is a gendered, patriarchal construct. For a helpful overview of feminist philosophy of religion see Frankenberry (2011).
- 4 As David Burrell observes, 'to picture God as an additional being over against or parallel to the universe itself will be to treat God similarly to objects within the universe, related to the universe itself as objects within the world are related to each other' (1998: 72).
- 5 Peter Forrest has an interesting defence of what he calls 'properly anthropocentric metaphysics' ('anthropomorphism' he evidently supposes to be an intrinsically pejorative term) in Forrest 2007, Chapter 2, Section 2.
- 6 A major support for this confidence is the judgment that Alvin Plantinga's 'Free Will Defence' succeeds in rebutting the 'Logical' Argument from Evil. See Plantinga (1974a; 1974b). For an important response see Mackie (1982).
- 7 Wykstra (1984)'s reply to Rowe (1979)'s 'evidential' version of the Argument from Evil has led to widespread discussion of so-called 'skeptical theism', thought by many to be the current 'cutting edge' of discussion of the Argument within analytical philosophy.
- 8 See Adams (1999). For discussions of the Argument from Evil as it relates specifically to the Christian concept of God, it is her work, perhaps, that has the best claim to be classed as 'cutting edge'.
- 9 For a recent discussion and endorsement of 'anti-theodicy', see Gleeson (2012).
- 10 See Dostoyevsky (1958: 286–88).
- 11 See Bishop and Perszyk (2011).
- 12 See Cupitt (1980) and Geering (1994) for examples of anti-realist interpretations of Christian belief.
- 13 See Aquinas *Summa Theologiae* I, q 3, 9, and 10.
- 14 *Fides quaerens intellectum* is the stance Anselm (1078/1965), following Augustine, explicitly adopts in *Proslogion*.
- 15 See, for instance, Sarot (1992)'s defence of divine passibility.
- 16 This response was employed in classical theism – medieval doctrines of analogy are a major specialist subject: see Ashworth (2009).
- 17 Consider, for example, Magritte's famous 1928–29 oil painting *La trahison des images*: a painting of a smoker's pipe, with the inscription, 'Ceci n'est pas une pipe' ('This is not a pipe').
- 18 It might be suggested that, properly understood, Plantinga's account of the divine with which I opened should be rephrased so that it does not hold that God *is* a person – only that God *is analogous to* a person. That view may be held by a philosopher who – unlike Plantinga – is a materialist about created persons, and so holds that 'God's being a person without a body' involves an analogous extension from our understanding of personhood. Such a philosopher's conception of the divine may still count, however, as personal omniGod theism: though not strictly a person (relative to the materialist view that a person is essentially physically realised), God may still be thought of as a free intentional agent responsible for his actions.
- 19 For open theism see for example Pinnock *et al.* (1994) and Sanders (1998); for process theism, see for example Cobb and Griffin (1976) and Hartshorne (1984); for developmental theism see Forrest (2007). Nagasawa (2008) argues that Anselmian theism (i.e., theism that accepts Anselm's formula) need not entail personal omniGod theism, but only 'the maximalGod thesis' that 'God is the being that has the maximal consistent set of knowledge, power and benevolence.' It may be doubted whether the degree of attenuation involved in a shift from a personal omniGod to a personal maximalGod is *by itself* sufficient to overcome objections to personal omniGod theism.
- 20 For a thorough consideration of pantheist conceptions of the divine, see Levine (1994).
- 21 Of course, Tillich does offer an account of what the 'ground of being' refers to. See, for example, Tillich (1955: 81 ff.).
- 22 There may be good reason to think that God's reality makes the Universe worthwhile for *all* its creatures – obviously, however, the value-world accessible to us is our own, just as the perceptual world accessible to us is our own.
- 23 Though collective salvation is at least equally important as individual salvation, I venture no account of it, noting only that it will presuppose an identification of the pathologies of collective sin – for example, the phenomena of herd behaviour, and the way institutions can cause harm despite the good intentions of the individuals who constitute them.
- 24 As Marilyn Adams supposes (see Adams 1999).
- 25 Johnston's list of these 'large-scale' defects is as follows: 'arbitrary suffering, aging (once it has reached the corrosive stage), our profound ignorance of our condition, the isolation of ordinary self-involvement,

- the vulnerability of everything we cherish to time and chance, and, finally, to untimely death' (ibid. 15). As already hinted (note 94), certain *collective* defects may need to be added to this list.
- 26 See Leslie (1979, chapter 1; 1989, chapter 8).
- 27 Analytical philosophers have noted several different ways of interpreting social Trinitarianism: the one I have in mind is closest to 'Perichoretic Monotheist Social Trinitarianism' (see Tuggy 2009).
- 28 Swinburne (1994) comes close to answering this question in the affirmative.

Part III

Epistemology of religious belief

11

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

Jerome Gellman

Philosophers of religion are divided over whether religious experience provides epistemic support for religious beliefs. I am one of those who maintain that at least some do. In what follows, I argue that we defenders have taken too narrow a view of the ways religious belief gets positive epistemic support when a person has a religious experience. I will be proposing ways that religious experience provides support – thick support – for religious belief that we defenders have neglected.

By a ‘religious experience’ I mean the following: *an experience purportedly granting acquaintance with, or supporting belief in the existence of, realities or states of affairs of a kind not accessible by way of sense perception, somatosensory modalities, or standard introspection and having religious meaning for the subject.* One can have a sense experience while having a religious experience, but what makes it a religious experience is distinct from what makes it a sense experience. Each of the following counts as a religious experience: experience of the emptiness of all reality; experience of God’s loving presence; experience of God admonishing one; experience that one is included in the Absolute; experience from which one forms the belief that one’s life has transcendent meaning. In what follows, I will say that *an experience, E, of S’s, supports (or has positive epistemic import for) a belief, B, of S’s if S forms B as a result of E, and E is either evidence for B or creates some grounding for B.* Support comes in degrees, including support that falls short of full justification or of fully adequate grounding, and it is vulnerable to defeaters.

Analytic philosophers of religion have been interested largely in theistic experiences and theistic beliefs. The relevant theistic experiences are either such that, *allegedly*, God is perceived to be present or acting in one form or other, or else such that from them a person forms beliefs about God, including that God exists, even if God is not present. Theistic beliefs are beliefs involving commitment to God’s existence. (Notice: That a theistic experience occurs does not entail God’s existence. That a theistic belief is true does.) Accordingly, my focus here will be on how theistic belief gets support when a person undergoes a theistic experience. What I say about theistic experiences and theistic beliefs should be applicable, *mutatis mutandis*, in part or in whole, to at least some other religious experiences and religious beliefs, as well.

Philosophers have advanced three major approaches that endorse theistic experiences as support for theistic beliefs: (1) Richard Swinburne’s Principle of Credulity; (2) William Alston’s Doxastic Practice approach; and (3) Alvin Plantinga’s Proper Functionalism approach. Each has led to a massive literature of criticism and defense. It is impossible to attempt a survey of those

exchanges here or to evaluate the acceptability of each of these views. Accordingly, in the first part of what follows ('Three Views'), I focus on how each of these views, if acceptable, leaves us with too narrow an understanding of how theistic experiences provide support for theistic belief. After that, in the second part ('Acceptance and Thick Support'), I argue for expanding our vision of such support so as to encompass not only belief-formation as the fruit of theistic experience, but also forms of acceptance. In addition, I sketch a proposal of important ways in which theistic belief and acceptance gain support when one has a theistic experience, ways entirely different from the three views I will have canvassed.

Three views

Richard Swinburne's Principle of Credulity

Richard Swinburne (1979/1991: 254) endorses a principle he calls 'the Principle of Credulity' (PC): *It is a principle of rationality that (in the absence of special considerations) if it seems (epistemically) to a subject that O is present, then probably O is present.* In the 'epistemic' sense of 'seems', for Swinburne, 'It seems to S that O is present' means that S is inclined to believe O is present on the basis of his present experience. 'Special considerations' refers to reasons to think or suspect that *x* had not been present to the subject, reasons that defeat a presumption, according to PC, that *x* was present, or reasons to think that the subject's experience, on the present occasion, is impugned by other considerations. So, if it seems to a person that God is present and no special considerations obtain, by the Principle of Credulity, probably God is present.

Swinburne is treating an experience of the presence of God as just like any other sense-experience, in the respect that support goes from a discrete experience to a discrete proposition. *There seems to be a tree in front of me* straightaway – in the absence of special defeating conditions – supports *Probably, there is a tree in front of me*. Just so, *It seems that God is present* straightaway – in the absence of special defeating conditions – supports *Probably, God is present*. Swinburnian support fails to give adequate support to the typical epistemic wallop theistic experiences can provide, issuing in deep conviction and a profound change in life. Swinburnian support does not sufficiently account for the tenacity with which experience-induced theistic belief can be held, and the recalcitrance such belief can have to counter-evidence. If these features of theistic experience are to be rationally justified we need a thicker support than that which Swinburne provides. The problem here is that Swinburne, as well as those who have followed him in this approach, including myself, has failed to appreciate the epistemic repercussions of what happens when it is *God*, and not a tree, that is allegedly experienced, and thus has missed the support from the profound changes in one's beliefs, desires, and values that can come about as a result. I pick up on this theme in the second part.

William Alston's Doxastic Practice approach

William Alston says that a 'doxastic practice' 'involves a family of ways of going from grounds – doxastic and experiential, and perhaps others – to a belief with a certain content' (Alston 1991: 100). And: 'A doxastic practice can be thought of as a system or constellation of dispositions or habits ... each of which yields a belief as output that is related in a certain way to an "input"' (Alston 1991: 153). A doxastic practice is a way of forming and epistemically evaluating beliefs (the 'output') from various cognitive inputs together with an overrider system. Alston defined an 'overrider system' as what 'determines how we go from prima facie to unqualified justification; as such it has a crucial bearing on what outputs are ultimately approved' (Alston 1991: 189).

Alston argues that the justification of every doxastic practice is ‘epistemically circular’, that is, its reliability cannot be established independently of the practice itself. The support for the reliability of any doxastic practice, including for its override system, is always internal support, which already assumes the reliability of the practice. However, we cannot avoid engaging in doxastic practices. Therefore, it is rational to engage in the doxastic practices we do engage in provided there is no good reason to think they are unreliable. Unreliability could come from the emergence of internal inconsistency in the practice or from inconsistency between a practice and other practices that have veto power over it.

There is a Christian mystical doxastic practice, says Alston. It mandates taking certain kinds of experiences as input, running them by an override system and forming theistic beliefs. Hence, as with all doxastic practices, in practical terms, it is rational for a person who participates in a Christian mystical practice to continue doing so until it can be shown to be an unreliable practice. Hence, the beliefs produced in the Christian practice are practically justified.

A problem with Alstonian support is that it supports only *continuing* in a Christian mystical practice when already engaged in it. Alston seemed to have in mind people who simply ‘find themselves’ inside a Christian practice, such as those who are raised Christians. Alston gives no experiential epistemic support for joining such a practice in the first place. After all, a person might join a Christian mystical practice, or allow herself to be absorbed into one, for irrational reasons. We should be tepid about granting a certificate of practical rationality where a person has joined a Christian mystical doxastic practice for irrational reasons. Simply presently being in a Christian practice cannot make you immune to a judgment about the epistemic credentials of your grounds for having joined it in the first place. Hence, my attention is turned to epistemic support for conversion experiences, from which a person might be prompted to join a Christian mystical practice or simply find herself in one as a consequence. Only by judging the credentials of experiences occurring independently of being embedded in Christian mystical practice can we fully account for how theistic experience supports theistic belief.

Alvin Plantinga’s properly basic beliefs

Alvin Plantinga (2000: 156) gives the following ‘nutshell’ account of his epistemology of proper functionalism: *A belief has warrant for a person only if that belief is produced by cognitive faculties functioning properly (subject to no dysfunction) in a cognitive environment that is appropriate for one’s kind of cognitive faculties, according to a design plan that is successfully aimed at truth.* Plantinga argues that if God exists, God would want humans to have warranted belief in God. So, we should expect there to be a reliable cognitive faculty for this purpose, answering to Plantinga’s requirements for conferring warrant. This faculty has been called the *sensus divinitas*. Various experiences properly ground or enhance belief in God through this faculty. These experiences would include perceiving beauty in nature, feeling God’s forgiveness, and feeling God speaking to you while reading the Bible. Such experiences have positive epistemic import for the proposition that comes to be believed. The experience non-propositionally grounds the belief rather than being evidence for it. So, if God exists, the appropriate experiences warrantably ground our belief in God.

Plantinga’s theistic model for properly basic belief in God relies on a theology that posits a sense of the divine that should operate on a grand scale. People in general should be believing in God. To explain why this sense does not operate so grandly as expected, Plantinga invokes the idea that sin damages our noetic makeup. This theology then posits ways in which our noetic makeup can get repaired fully or in part.

Despite having credentials in some Christian sources, Calvin in particular, this theological story is not compelling from a broad theistic perspective, or even for all Christians. Several

Christian philosophers do not recognize a *sensus divinitas* of the kind Plantinga advances. I include here such diverse Christian thinkers as Søren Kierkegaard, Joseph Butler, William Abraham, Ronald Hepburn, Michael Murray, C. Stephen Evans, Paul Moser, and John Hick. In Judaism, as well, the *sensus divinitas* plays a minor role. Far more prevalent is an appeal to a reliable tradition as the basis of belief and to trust in those who have achieved a higher consciousness of God. Some forms of Judaism will emphasize God's hiddenness, as opposed to God's eagerness to be revealed.

Here are a few examples of Christian philosophers whose views clash with supposing a *sensus divinitas* to exist. In his *Analogy of Religion, Natural and Revealed*, Butler (1878: 210–11) remarked on the 'evidence of religion not appearing obvious' and that 'a conviction of its truth is not forced upon every one' as being a test of how seriously human beings will take up the subtle signs God provides. It is because of divine design that God does not make himself manifest to all, not by sinful fallenness.

Evans (2010: 19) writes:

Those who do not wish to love and serve God find it relatively easy to reject the idea that there is knowledge of God. The plausibility of this principle stems from the assumption that God wants the relation humans are to enjoy with him to be one in which they love and serve him freely and joyfully.

This, according to Evans, explains why God does not provide strongly indicative natural signs of God's presence in the world. God abides by a 'Principle of Easy Resistibility'. Yet, says Evans, God does make his presence subtly accessible to those who wish to know him. Evans makes of this the 'Principle of Wide Accessibility', according to which God makes it *possible* at least for humans to come to know his existence. Notwithstanding, the signs have to be read freely so that a person will enter freely into relationship with God. Open signs are not absent because of sin, but by design.

Moser (2008: 243) argues extensively that God would grant a non-coercive offer of fellowship to humans in which we are free to respond to God in love. God's call:

may intrude a bit into our experience, say in conscience, but it can readily be overlooked, ignored, suppressed, or dismissed by us, because it is intended by God not to coerce a will ... but to be willingly received by humans. In particular, it's designed to woo or invite us rather than to force or dominate us.

These philosophers, as well as the others I have mentioned, believe that God wants us to come to God in freedom and joy. Not sinfulness, but God's purposeful design accounts for our failures to detect God's existence. On this conception, our experiences do not necessarily cause us to simply 'find ourselves' with theistic beliefs. Rather, theism can be formed in us by our actively responding to what we experience. For this view, we require a different understanding of the support provided by theistic experiences for theism than that of the *sensus divinitas*. We require an approach that will warrant a person in taking 'signs' as an indication of God. To encompass this fuller range of theistic theology, for the remainder of this chapter my focus will be on alternatives to the *sensus divinitas* for accounting for the positive epistemic import of theistic experiences.

Acceptance and thick support

The above three views provide support only for theistic *belief* and account for limited types of epistemic support. We need to attend as well to *acceptance* and *provisional* acceptance of God's

existence as resulting from theistic experience, not only to belief. In addition, we need to attend to thick support for belief and acceptance, to be found in what I call ‘mediated support’.

Acceptance and provisional acceptance

Theistic experience can lead to acceptance or provisional acceptance of theistic belief. These might be epistemic end-points or, in turn, subsequently issue into full-blown belief. I will say that *S* accepts *p* when:

1. *S* does not have a belief-feeling that *p*.
2. *S* decides to use *p* as a premise in theoretical and practical reasoning where this is appropriate, and *S* has a tendency to do so.
3. When *S* considers whether *p* is the case, *S* tends to have a positive epistemic attitude toward the truth of *p*.
4. If someone asks *S* whether *p*, *S* will have a tendency to respond affirmatively.
5. *S* will tend to act in ways that would be appropriate if *p* were the case, given *S*’s goals, aversions, and other propositional attitudes.

Acceptance differs from belief in two ways. With acceptance a person might be aware of reasons to think *p* true, yet not find herself believing *p*, having that familiar belief-feeling about *p*. This can happen, for example, when the reasons to think *p* true are not strong enough to generate a belief that *p*. Secondly, one *decides* to accept a proposition, whereas ordinarily one cannot decide what to believe just like that. The reasons in favour of *p*’s truth will be strong enough for a person to want to decide to accept that *p*.

Provisional acceptance differs from just plain acceptance in that in provisional acceptance a person accepts a proposition to see what will come from accepting it, to see how it will fit with further experience and beliefs. The person has enough of a positive attitude toward the truth of *p* to accept it provisionally, but not enough to accept it outright. The consequences of provisional acceptance can vary from subsequent rejection to full belief, with acceptance in between. Provisional acceptance of *p* differs from adopting *p* as a mere hypothesis in that, with the latter, one need not have a positive attitude toward the truth of *p*, only wish to test its truth. With provisional acceptance a person has enough of a positive attitude toward the truth of *p* to make it her own – but only provisionally.

Swinburne, Alston, and Plantinga deal exclusively with belief, leaving out acceptance. This ignores *decision* in response to theistic experience, decision that can be warranted and also freely given, even when belief is not warranted. That God’s signs might require a decision on the part of one who experiences those signs fits well the view of those philosophers and theologians who declare that a person must come to God in freedom. Freedom implies decision.

Mediation

I will say that a theistic experience *E* affords a *direct support*, *D*, for a theistic belief, *B*, when: (1) in *D*, *E* supports *B*; and (2) in *D*, there is no element essential to *E*’s support of *B* that comes about as a result of *E* (other than, at most, *S*’s belief that *E* occurred). And I will say that *E* yields a *mediated support*, *M*, for *B* when: (1) in *M*, *E* does not directly support *B*; and (2) in *M*, *E* gives rise to elements essential for the support of *B*. (Analogous definitions are to apply to acceptance and provisional acceptance.) *E* can give both a direct and a mediated support for *B*.

It is in the nature of direct support that it is in place when the theistic belief is formed. Direct support is either evidence or grounding, and these are there from the start. Mediated support,

though, might come about only *following* the initial forming of the theistic belief. That would be because a chain of mediated support might become epistemically adequate only after the belief-formation and so provide support only retroactively, as it were, back to the earlier formed belief. Alternatively, the person might initially have had only a proto-belief, a belief-feeling for a vaguely formulated belief, which becomes clarified and determined following mediated support. This is true for acceptance as well.

When a person has come to believe or accept a theistic proposition because of a theistic experience, and is *presently* warranted in doing so, it does not follow that the person had adequate support or the present degree of support from the very start. The present support could be from what the belief or acceptance received *subsequent* to the initial moment of its formation, support traceable through mediating steps back to the theistic experience.

Each of the three views I have canvassed thinks of the way experience epistemically supports theistic beliefs as direct support, thus as support that is present as soon as the belief forms. As noted above, Swinburne's paradigm of justification is an experience where God seems to be present, and the justified conclusion from that straightaway is that probably God is present. This is direct support. Alston, like Swinburne, thinks of the Christian mystical practice endorsing theistic belief very much like sense perception endorses sense-perceptual beliefs. Typical examples from Alston of how the Christian mystical practice works are: *I saw Christ at my side* endorsing *Christ was at my side*; *I was conscious of God's presence* endorsing *God was present*; and *I heard a voice firmly saying*. ... endorsing *God was saying*. ... In such cases, the experience supports the belief in much the way sense-experience supports sense-perceptual belief. One goes from an experience to a belief with nothing more than a filtering override system. Alston's typical experiences in the Christian mystical practice support, through the filter of the override system, the corresponding beliefs. (That Alstonian support must pass the test of the override system of the Christian practice does not mean that Alstonian support is mediated. It would be mediated only if the experience produced the override system. It does not. So, Alstonian support is direct.)

Plantinga explicitly compares experiential non-propositional grounds for theistic belief to experiential non-propositional grounds for sense-perceptual experience, as well as to memory and experiences of the *a priori* (Plantinga 2000: 176). Plantinga describes his model as generating beliefs from experience 'unmediatedly', as when one looks up at the starry night sky and simply 'finds oneself' with the belief that God exists. Plantinga acknowledges the possibility of a model in which the *sensus divinitas* mediates beliefs, referring to a study by Michael Sudduth. Sudduth argues that John Calvin's 'natural knowledge of God' included inferential knowledge, mediated by reasons (Sudduth 1995: 55). According to Sudduth, Calvin affirmed that the *sensus divinitas* could operate in a mediated way as follows. *S* has an experience which, via the *sensus divinitas*, creates a non-theistic belief or beliefs, from which *S* then infers a theistic belief. *S*'s experience will provide support for the theistic belief as mediated by the non-theistic belief. An example would be when *S* has an experience of the beauty of a grand mountain range, which experience gives rise via the *sensus divinitas* to the belief that these mountains could be so very beautiful only if God exists. Then *S* all on her own infers from that, together with believing in the great grandeur of the mountains, that God exists.

Sudduth's mediated 'propositional' support shares with direct support its being in place when the theistic belief is formed. The inference has the support when it is made. However, there exist kinds of mediated support for theistic belief (and acceptance) realised only subsequent to the formation of the belief (or acceptance). These kinds of mediated support are important to consider in experiential support for theistic belief. I call these 'noetic reconstruction' and 'value-attitude reformation'.

Noetic reconstruction

I propose we attend to the mediated epistemic support a theistic experience provides by initiating what I will call 'noetic reconstruction' and 'value-attitude reformation'. By 'noetic reconstruction' I mean a new, extensive, systematic modification of a person's noetic content. Reconstruction can be deliberate or something that happens to a person, or a mixture of both. A noetic reconstruction would pertain to: (a) the propositions currently in one's noetic structure; and (b) the way the propositions are connected, including by deduction, induction, abduction, and causality, or just the way propositions go together for specific purposes.

A theistic conversion experience can be the cause of noetic reconstruction by giving rise all at once to a radical ingression into one's noetic framework so that one sees life and reality in a wholly new way. The experience of coming to possess a radically restructured noetic system can help explain the profound sense of self-transformation often to be found in theistic experiences. This would help account for the profound effect theistic experiences can have on a person, due to a sudden, massive noetic redoing. Alternately, the experience might first precipitate deep discontent with one's present noetic content. The break-up of one's previous noetic structure pursuant to many theistic experiences, and the consequent noetic discontent, can help explain the sense of intense disorientation sometimes accompanying theistic experience. In such cases, the theistic content of the experience will then serve as a criterion of adequacy for the ensuing noetic reconstruction.

Accordingly, the order of the noetic reconstruction and the nature of the epistemic support of the acquired theistic belief can take different forms. Here are some examples (where 'theistic reconstruction' refers to deeply ingressive noetic reconstruction along theistic lines, '→' means 'causes', and '⇒' means '(which) epistemically supports'):

- (1) Theistic experience → theistic noetic reconstruction ⇒ theistic belief.
- (2) Theistic experience → theistic belief → noetic discontent → theistic noetic reconstruction ⇒ theistic belief.
- (3) Theistic experience → noetic discontent → theistic noetic reconstruction ⇒ theistic belief.

In (1), we are to imagine theistic experience prompting a shake-up in one's noetic structure, while not yet producing belief, which in turn prompts a newly emerging noetic complex. Features of the new theistic noetic complex (to be given below) will supply support for the belief in God, which belief is embedded centrally in the reconstruction. The experience supports the belief by the mediation of the latter.

In (2), theistic belief is formed before noetic reconstruction; however, its epistemic support depends (at least in part) on the success of the subsequent reconstruction in which it plays a central causal role. The belief gets epistemic support when the inevitable noetic discontent follows and produces an emerging theistic noetic complex that returns noetic satisfaction. Features of the new theistic noetic complex will supply support for the belief in God retroactively, back to the belief in God earlier formed and embedded in it.

In (3), experience unhinges a person's trust in her present noetic structure. She now sees through her previous understandings, and they no longer serve her. Life and the world suddenly lose the meaning she thought they had. Here is an example of this taken from a characterisation by Martin Buber (1946: 76) of the experience of a 'miraculous' event.

Miracle can be fully included in the objective, scientific complex of nature and history; the vital meaning of which destroys the security of the whole complex of

knowledge and explodes the fixity of the fields of experience named 'Nature' and 'History'.

Given the noetic discontent and the theistic experience, the person constructs, or finds herself with, a new understanding along theistic lines. Features of this new understanding (see below) will support the belief in God.

Value-attitude reformation

By 'value-attitude reformation' I mean an extensive modification of a person's attitudinal complexes and behavioural dispositions expressing value orientations, including importantly attitudes about the meaning of life. Value-attitude reformation can result from a sudden 'seeing' of things in a radically new way or from the emergence of deep value discontent. The reformation can be deliberate or just something that comes over a person, or a mixture of both. By analogy with what transpires with noetic reconstruction, we get these three versions, where 'theistic value reformation' refers to a value reformation along theistic lines.

- (1) The theistic experience \rightarrow theistic value reformation \Rightarrow theistic belief.
- (2) The theistic experience \rightarrow theistic belief \rightarrow value discontent \rightarrow theistic value reformation \Rightarrow theistic belief.
- (3) The theistic experience \rightarrow value discontent \rightarrow theistic value reformation \Rightarrow theistic belief.

In all three, the experience's support of the theistic belief is mediated by the value-attitude reformation. Put differently, the epistemic test of the theistic belief is in the character of its subsequent ingress into, and effect upon, the subject's value situation.

In a theistic conversion experience, especially, both noetic reconstruction and value transformation should be expected to occur. Inserting the two into one complex process gives us a large number of possibilities of how the two can cooperate in getting from an experience to epistemic support for theistic belief. Here are two examples:

- (1) The theistic experience \rightarrow theistic noetic reconstruction \rightarrow value discontent \rightarrow value reformation \rightarrow (theistic noetic reconstruction + value reformation \Rightarrow theistic belief)
- (2) The theistic experience \rightarrow theistic belief \rightarrow theistic noetic reconstruction \rightarrow value discontent \rightarrow theistic value reformation \rightarrow (theistic noetic reconstruction + theistic value reformation \Rightarrow theistic belief)

When in addition to belief we consider also acceptance and provisional acceptance, the possibilities for support multiply. Here is one possibility, a modification of the example I have just listed:

- (3) The theistic experience \rightarrow theistic provisional acceptance \rightarrow theistic noetic reconstruction \rightarrow value discontent \rightarrow theistic value reformation \rightarrow (theistic noetic reconstruction + theistic value reformation \Rightarrow theistic belief)

This scenario tells the story of an initial experience with not enough epistemic punch to cause a belief-feeling yet possessing sufficient epistemic clout for the subject to decide to accept theism provisionally. Subsequently, the subject finds sufficient confirmation for her acceptance from noetic reconstruction and value transformation, so that her acceptance turns into belief.

How do theistic noetic reconstruction and theistic value reformation provide support for theistic belief? I cite two ways, each separately, although they commingle and are mutually supportive in how they function.

Mediated support

Support by noetic coherence

In theistic noetic reconstruction and theistic value reformation, belief in God becomes embedded as a central organizing principle in a new, convincing noetic structure. The new construction either is, or shows strong promise of becoming, far more coherent and comprehensive than what was previously in place. The new structure is now so convincing compared to a non-theistic world-view that the subject might not be able to imagine there being any satisfactory alternative to it. This does not mean that all of one's questions are answered; rather, this noetic constellation gives better answers when it does give answers, and provides the right direction for going further. Such coherence counts in favour of the belief in God as opposed to non-belief embedded in alternative noetic structures.

Support by changed value complex

Theistic belief gains support by one's newly shaped value complex. Consider a person who finds a cluster of her empirical experiences compelling and yet finds herself without a satisfactory ontology to explain their occurrence. Suppose that others also find themselves in a similar situation regarding similar experiences. It would then be warranted to make new ontological assumptions for the sake of explanation. This is one way in which science advances. Similarly, a person could find a value-attitude complex to life and the world profoundly compelling, yet not have an ontology sufficient to account for the appropriateness of these values. By analogy to compelling empirical experiences, making new ontological assumptions would be warranted for obtaining a satisfactory explanation. Value-attitudes can be very basic, pervasive, and convincing and demand a correlative ontology to adequately account for its appropriateness to the world. In this way value-attitudes could support theistic belief. For example, suppose people were convinced optimists about life. Suppose they believed, in the words of William James, that 'the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word' (1979: 25). This attitude could be so profoundly basic to their relation to reality, as basic as the deliverances of their senses, that it would justify their engaging in ontologizing to answer the question, 'What would reality have to be like to make this optimism justified?'

When thrown by a theistic experience into a convincing value transformation, the fact that belief in God makes the best sense ontologically of newly emerging, profoundly felt values, counts in favour of the truth of that belief. When one finds others of the same mind, the value-explaining power of belief in God is enhanced. What I say here about value-attitudes should be expanded to account for newly discovered pervasive beauty, awe, and mystery. Experiences of the latter can be so persuasive as to support a belief in God as explanation. These can work in tandem with experience-induced value-attitude changes to provide positive epistemic import for theistic belief arising from religious experience in a mediated way. The theistic experience brings with it support for theistic belief by the mediation of the satisfactory value-reformation.

Superior epistemic vantage point

Before an initial theistic experience, a person had experienced the world and herself differently, perhaps atheistically. In having a theistic experience, one *sees through* one's previous world-outlook. A *seeing-through* experience counts in favour of believing or accepting what one now sees. The relationship between the old, secular view and the new theistic one can be compared to the change of appearance of the painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel after its restoration. Before restoration, the ceiling's paintings were covered in grime and soot, and had been damaged by water. Because of that, paintings had been painted over in part, in misguided attempts to restore what people thought was there but could not see clearly. Just so, a theistic conversion experience can grant a sense of one's previous secular view having been *unknowingly* like looking through a covering of soot and grime, as well as having had one's observation suffer from misguided attempts to present a proper picture of what then could not be seen clearly. One well understands why secularists *think* they are seeing properly and understands also why they fail to see what one now sees properly. It is as though one has experienced a seeing of a restoration. This is an epistemic reason to now discount the secular point of view.

To use another analogy, a person in a theistic experience could be warranted in seeing herself as a kind of 'expert' and therefore in a superior epistemic position relative to novices. That novices do not see what she sees when observing a Cloud Chamber is not a defeater for what a particle physicist sees. The latter, after all, is an expert, and her expertise justifies her believing that she sees what is not accessible to others. She sees something deeper in the visible misty tracks of the chamber, recognizing particles passing through the chamber's medium. In the same way, it is not solely noetic and attitudinal coherence and explanatory power that are relevant to the support of theism in a theist experience. The experience brings with it a perspective newly granted of now being in a superior epistemic position than previously because now one can see what others ordinarily do not see. This counts in favour of the theistic experience. When one can identify other 'experts' concerning such experiences, one's conviction is justifiably strengthened.

Strong noetic reconstruction and value reformation that might accompany theistic experience can help account for the tenacity with which ensuing theist belief will be held and the recalcitrance of such belief to change. For it is not a matter of having only a supported belief, but of having a supported thick noetic and value networks holding the theistic belief in place.

The philosopher Janet Martin Soskice (2009: 77–78) reported on 'a dramatic religious experience' which converted her to Christianity. Her report illustrates well the roles that noetic reconstruction and value-attitude reformation can play in theistic belief. Before her experience, Soskice thought religious people must be so 'for a sense of belonging or nostalgia', or were 'clearly undereducated and overexcited'. Religious believers were either cognitively lazy or cognitively deprived. She writes of her experience:

I was in the shower, on an ordinary day, and found myself to be surrounded by a presence of love, a love so real and so personal that I could not doubt it. ... I could not doubt the reality of that loving presence, and still cannot. ... I was turned around. Converted. Not that I had been the sort of person who kicked old ladies and found myself now helping them across the street. I was much the same person, but facing in a new direction.

And she writes:

Once I believed in God: things clicked into place. ... I do feel that it becomes possible to see the presence of the world and its orderliness in a new way when you believe it

to be a gift – literally gratuitous – and a gift from a Giver. ... I do believe that the world fits together only if you believe there's a God.

(Soskice 2005: 28)

In personal correspondence, Soskice wrote to me, 'I was at first very reluctant to talk about how I "came to believe in God" (misleading phrase).' In reply to my question why she thought that 'came to believe in God' was a misleading phrase, she replied as follows:

I suppose because 'believe in' so readily suggests (to many) believing in an assertion, whereas this is more like falling in love, 'seeing as,' 'resting in'. ... It's not as though one had a list of facts (or beliefs) and just added another to the list. My life was changed.

Although Soskice hesitates to speak of herself as simply 'believing' a proposition about God, her description of her experience strongly suggests that she did acquire a belief in God. And it appears that her belief in God was formed in her from the start. It was not a matter, however, of simply acquiring a propositional belief. Her belief was formed together with a sense of being 'turned around', akin to falling in love. In my terms, there occurred the start of a new value orientation; she was 'facing in a new direction'. To be sure, it was not a complete reorientation, but a new wide-ranging value framework waiting for details to be filled in. Some of Soskice's old values remained, but now became embedded in new, wider values and took on radically changed meanings. In addition, Soskice came to see that with belief in God everything 'clicked' into place. She became convinced that the world 'fits together' only if you believe in God. She is indicating here what I have called 'noetic reconstruction', providing a comprehensive, coherent, theistic world-outlook. When assessing the epistemic credentials of Soskice's theistic belief, we are not restricted to its first stage, in which belief in God arises in a causally direct manner. The epistemic status of the belief should be evaluated on the basis of the entire ensuing epistemic situation. In a report such as the above of a conversion experience, belief in God finds support in noetic reconstruction and value reformation, backed by a sense of having a restored view of reality from a vantage point not available to all others.

Conclusion

Swinburne's Principle of Credulity might provide some support for theistic belief based on theistic experience. However, Swinburne omits the kinds of thick support theistic belief garners in other ways from theistic experience. For sure, Swinburne would agree that a newly acquired theistic belief makes serious ingress into one's noetic and value structures, but it is important to recognize the important part that process can play in supporting the directly acquired theistic belief. Theistic experience provides thicker support than does the Principle of Credulity by itself.

I pointed out that Alston's Doxastic Practice approach provides no support for joining a Christian practice, giving only a reason to stay with such a practice in which one already participates. My remedy is two-fold. First, justification for joining a Christian doxastic practice need support only *accepting* Christian teachings. There might be enough in one's pre-practice theistic (or Christian-type) experiences to provide support for *acceptance*, which, in turn, justifies a person in joining a Christian doxastic practice to acquire a standard for her *accepting* experience-based outcomes. Secondly, there might be enough noetic and value support from one's pre-practice experiences to justify one's joining a Christian doxastic practice. In that practice, one could then acquire incremental support for those noetic and value structures when the

practice fleshes out those structures in a self-justifying process. Thus do noetic reconstruction and value reformation provide a thickening of support for theistic belief following theistic experiences.

Plantinga considers ways in which a *sensus divinitas* may underwrite warranted resistance to (apparent) counter-evidence to God's existence. He compares it to warranted resistance to counter-evidence of a clear memory belief about where you were at a certain time. Just as you are warranted in depending on your memory belief to defeat the counter-evidence – 'But I clearly remember that I was walking in the woods at exactly that time!' – you are warranted in depending on your *sensus divinitas* belief that God exists to defeat counter-evidence: 'But I experienced that God exists when I looked up at the starry sky!'

However, the epistemic force of a theistic belief induced by the *sensus divinitas* can be much stronger than an ordinary memory belief like where I was at a certain time. A single memory belief like remembering where I was at a certain time has a certain degree of ingress into one's noetic structure. That ingress is decidedly thin compared to that of a theistic experience with its power to grossly revamp one's noetic structure into a comprehensive, coherent whole. An ordinary memory like remembering where I was at a certain time, generally speaking gives less epistemic support for a memory belief than can a theistic experience give to theistic belief. In addition, the degree of value-attitude reformation attendant upon my remembering where I was at a certain time might be significant in certain instances. Yet it will be confined to a relatively small part of my value structure, while a theistic experience, as I have pointed out, can provide a much richer value support for theistic belief by virtue of radical value change.

Finally, by acknowledging acceptance and provisional acceptance as outcomes of theistic experience, we are able to accommodate the view that God has not given us a *sensus divinitas* but wants us to come to God in freedom and joy. Rather, God will give muted signs of his presence which signal that God wants a person to positively respond. The best way to interpret such a response is that it involves acceptance or provisional acceptance. From a theistic point of view, the person will be judged by her willingness to decide to make her own *that God exists and is present to me*. From an epistemic point of view, support for making God her own will likely come directly from theistic experience and indirectly from the considerations that I have tried to present here.

12

RELIGIOUS FAITH

Mark Wynn

As well as having a broad, rather loosely defined sense, which is more or less equivalent to religious belief, the notion of religious faith has also been assigned a range of more specific senses, especially in the context of Christian theological reflection. Let's begin with this more restricted, Christian understanding of 'faith', before considering how that conception has been extended and challenged in the philosophy of religion literature in recent years. I am going to take as my starting point Thomas Aquinas's account of the nature of faith. Thomas provides a useful reference point both because he summarises and systematises earlier Christian traditions and because his approach so often serves as the backdrop for later discussions of the nature of faith.

Thomas Aquinas on the nature of faith

In the first article of the first question of the *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas asks about 'the need' for Christian theology, by putting to himself this question: 'is another teaching required apart from philosophical studies?' Thomas intends to include within the domain of 'philosophical studies' any rationally ordered enquiry which proceeds independently of appeal to scripture or 'revelation'. So here he is asking about whether a purely secular kind of enquiry might be sufficient for an understanding of human life. This is his reply to his question, given in the opening lines of the *Responsio*:

It should be urged that human well-being called for schooling in what God has revealed, in addition to the philosophical researches pursued by human reasoning. Above all because God destines us for an end beyond the grasp of reason; according to Isaiah, Eye hath not seen, O God, without thee what thou hast prepared for them that love thee. [Is 64. 4] Now we have to recognize an end before we can stretch out and exert ourselves for it. Hence the necessity for our welfare that divine truths surpassing reason should be signified to us through divine revelation.

Aquinas (1265–74/1964–74: 1a. 1. 1)

From this text, set down at the very beginning of Aquinas's treatise, we can see why the notion of 'faith' is going to be central to any broadly orthodox account of the nature of the Christian life. This life understands itself to be a response to a disclosure of God's purposes for human beings – and

the nature of these purposes cannot be established on the basis of the ‘philosophical sciences’ alone. Indeed, human beings may never have come to entertain this conception of the divine purposes, let alone to affirm it, but for revelation (John Paul II 1998). So, the believer assents to these thoughts about God’s purposes not because they are provable by reason, but on the grounds that they have been revealed by God. And this is the assent of ‘faith’.

On this view, the assent of faith is both ‘cognitive’ (insofar as it involves beliefs) and action-orienting (since it serves a practical goal, and requires an associated mode of life here and now). Although Aquinas does not say so in this passage, he clearly believes that reason itself can show that these matters lie beyond its jurisdiction: it can show that, if there is an end of human life of the kind that is proposed in Christian teaching, we will depend for our understanding of that end upon a reason-transcendent source; these are matters which, in the nature of the case, lie beyond the reach of ‘philosophical studies’. (See his suggestion that faith needs to be ‘infused’ – a matter to which I shall return shortly.)

At the same time, Aquinas is quick to affirm that Christian theology does not exist in some hermetically sealed intellectual sphere. On the contrary, in terms of its general structure, theological enquiry is readily compared to other kinds of investigation. He broaches this issue in the terms of his time by asking, in the second article of the first question of the *Summa Theologiae* (ST), ‘is Christian theology a science?’ He answers:

Christian theology should be pronounced to be a science. Yet bear in mind that sciences are of two kinds: some work from premises recognized in the innate light of intelligence, for instance arithmetic, geometry, and sciences of the same sort; while others work from premises recognized in the light of a higher science, for instance optics starts out from principles marked out by geometry and harmony from principles indicated by arithmetic. In this second manner is Christian theology a science, for it flows from founts recognized in the light of a higher science, namely God’s very own which he shared with the blessed. Hence as harmony credits its principles which are taken from arithmetic, so Christian theology takes on faith its principles revealed by God.

Although Aquinas’s Latin text does not use the term ‘faith’ (as the translator does here, in the final sentence), it is clear that he is indeed affirming that a Christian accepts the first principles of theology on ‘faith’, insofar as they are foundational for her reasoning, rather than being the product of ratiocination. But reason retains a role on this account insofar as it has a proper part to play in guiding our exploration of the meaning and implications of these principles. It will also have a part to play insofar as the assent of faith depends for its reasonability on the capacity of the believer (or the faith community collectively) to turn aside objections to these first principles. This ‘faith seeking understanding’ conception of theological enquiry continues to command wide support: on this view, the role of the theologian is not to ground the fundamental claims of the faith, but to unfold their meaning, to meet objections to them, and to use them as a basis for understanding all other fundamental questions of life (Helm 2000).

Something like Aquinas’s point has been made in the work of ‘reformed epistemologists’ in recent years. On this account, there is no requirement to follow the ‘classical foundationalists’ in supposing that the only proper starting points of enquiry are those beliefs which are self-evidently true or ‘evident to the senses’. On the perspective developed by Alvin Plantinga and others, Christians (and perhaps other religious believers) are entitled to take as ‘properly basic’ not only beliefs of these kinds, but also beliefs which are grounded in religious experience (Plantinga 1981). In a similar vein, Aquinas is suggesting that beliefs grounded in scripture can count as properly basic. It is implied in this perspective that every enquiry needs to start from certain

beliefs, which are not themselves the product of argumentation. And in support of this view, it might be urged that only so can an enquiry have a rich enough initial conception of its own subject matter to proceed to an investigation of that subject matter. In structural terms, Aquinas thinks, Christian theology is no different in this respect – it is just that its starting point includes beliefs drawn from a variety of sacred texts.

One might suppose that, even if rationally permissible, faith's assent will remain relatively uncertain, when compared with the assent which we give to, say, the apparent deliverances of the senses. But Aquinas holds that in the relevant sense, the assent of faith is in fact *more* certain than other kinds of intellectual assent. The certainty which obtains here is not, he acknowledges, subjective: for instance, it is not that we see the truth of the claims of faith so clearly that we have no choice but to affirm them. This is another kind of certainty. He comments: '[t]here is nothing to stop a thing that is objectively more certain by its nature from being subjectively less certain to us because of the disability of our minds, which, as Aristotle notes, *blink at the most evident things like bats in the sunshine*. Doubt about the articles of faith which falls to the lot of some is not because the reality is at all uncertain but because the human understanding is feeble' (ST 1a. 1. 5 AD 1). On this account, the assent of at least some believers is subjectively uncertain: these believers do not take the truth of the articles of faith to be evident beyond all reasonable doubt. But the assent of faith can be objectively certain even so – and will be objectively certain (and supremely certain in this sense) providing that God has so made the world that the assent of faith cannot fall into error.

All of these matters are addressed in the very first question of the *Summa Theologiae*. And they issue in a conception of faith as cognitive, practical, reason-transcendent, and, in the relevant sense, certain. It is only much later in the *Summa*, in the *Secunda Secundae*, that Aquinas turns explicitly to a treatment of the nature of 'faith'. Here he remarks that 'the act of faith is belief, an act of mind fixed on one alternative by reason of the will's command' (ST 2a2ae. 4. 1). We have seen that the assent of faith cannot be grounded in 'philosophical studies'; and here we learn that this assent is in fact voluntary. Aquinas expands on this point when he goes on to say:

it is clear that faith's act is pointed as to its end towards the will's object, i.e. the good. This good, the end of faith's act, is the divine good, the proper object of charity. This is why charity is called the form of faith, namely, because the act of faith is completed and shaped by charity.

(ST 2a2ae. 4. 3)

So the act of faith depends fundamentally not upon the weight of the evidence, but instead upon the will being drawn towards the divine good: it is the attractiveness of God, and the prospect of life with God, which moves the believer to assent to the claims of faith. Because faith is founded in this way upon 'charity', or the love of God, it is, Aquinas concludes, not only free but meritorious. By contrast, the devils' faith is the product not of love, but of the weight of the evidence. As Aquinas puts the point, their faith 'is, so to speak, forced from them by the evidence of signs. That they believe, then, is in no way to the credit of their wills' (ST 2a2ae. 5. 5 AD 3; compare James 2:19). So the assent of authentic Christian faith is (objectively) 'certain', and for many believers it is also confident, and in these respects it is like 'knowledge'; but at the same time, faith is also like 'opinion', insofar as it 'is not completed by a clear vision' but depends instead upon 'the will's command' (ST 2a2ae. 2. 1). Hence faith represents a kind of intermediate state, between knowledge and opinion.

We might well wonder how the commitment of faith is to be distinguished from mere wish-fulfilment if it is the product of the 'will's command'. I take it that Aquinas would respond by

appealing, once again, to the particular kind of ‘certainty’ that is proper to faith: the will is drawn to affirm the claims of faith because it finds the truth of those claims attractive; and if God has established a firm connection in this sphere between what the will finds attractive and what is in fact the case, then here, if not in general, the movement of the will will in fact serve as a reliable index of the truth. So Aquinas gives a broadly ‘externalist’ account of the rationality of faith – according to which faith is rational insofar as it derives from some belief-forming process which is reliably targeted at the truth. But there remains, of course, a question about whether the believer is entitled to suppose that her tendency to affirm various claims in fact derives from some such process. This is a matter to which I shall return below.

This externalist account of the rationality of the assent of faith fits with what Aquinas says about the causal context of this assent. Although it is voluntary, it would be a mistake to see the assent of faith as simply the product of human choice:

As to the assent to matters of faith, we can look to two types of cause. One is a cause that persuades from without, e.g. a miracle witness or a human appeal urging belief. No such cause is enough, however; one man believes and another does not, when both have seen the same miracle, heard the same preaching. Another kind of cause must therefore be present, an inner cause, one that influences a person inwardly to assent to the things of faith. The Pelagians thought this cause to be free will alone ... This is a false doctrine. The reason: since in assenting to the things of faith a person is raised above his own nature, he has this assent from a supernatural source influencing him ... the assent of faith ... has as its cause God, moving us inwardly through grace.
(ST 2a2ae. 6. 1)

In keeping with theological tradition, Aquinas thinks of faith not simply as an isolated act of choice, but as a virtue, that is, as a deep-seated and enduring predisposition to assent to the articles of faith (see 1 Cor. 13). And from this passage, it is clear that the virtue of faith is not the product simply of human choice and an associated process of habituation. Following Aristotle, Aquinas thinks that this sort of account will work well enough for the moral virtues (at least for the ‘acquired’ forms of the moral virtues) (ST 1a2ae. 63). But faith (and also the ‘infused’ moral virtues) depend not simply upon action in accordance with our human nature, but on our being lifted up ‘above our own nature’, through the operation of divinely infused grace.

Engaging with Aquinas

I have considered Thomas’s account of religious faith in some detail, not least because it provides a useful conceptual template for reviewing the character of later accounts of the nature of faith: following Aquinas’s scheme, we can ask what these accounts have to say about, for example, the freedom of the assent of faith, or its certainty, or its relation to God’s agency, or its meritoriousness, or its content (its ‘material object’, as Aquinas would say), or its relation to the exercise of reason, or its status as ‘knowledge’ or ‘opinion’. Aquinas’s account is also of interest because it continues to be normative for many Christians, especially for those who stand in the Catholic tradition. Let’s consider now the relationship between Thomas’s approach and some later accounts of the nature of Christian faith.

Famously, in the Reformation, there was a division of opinion on these questions, insofar as Protestants maintained, while Catholics denied, that faith alone, independently of ‘works’ or good deeds, was sufficient for salvation. This difference may be in some respects more terminological than substantive. As we have seen, for Thomas, faith has an ‘unformed’ as well as a

‘formed’ variety, where faith is ‘formed’ insofar as it derives not simply from ‘signs’, but from the love of God. And for Protestants just as much as Catholics, Thomistic unformed ‘faith’ can hardly be sufficient for salvation, since it is after all compatible with a hatred of God. So the claim that faith is sufficient for salvation must be restricted, if it is to have any plausibility, to the case of ‘formed’ faith. And in that sense of the term, both parties can agree that ‘faith’ is sufficient for salvation. Moreover, since it flows from the love of God, formed faith will issue in good works, when it is able to express itself in the realm of inter-human relations. But Catholics can allow that it is the disposition to perform such works, rather than their performance in fact, that is important for salvation, since the person of faith might after all be frustrated in their attempts to do good, through no fault of their own (Swinburne 2005: 146–47). Thomas’s insistence on the meritoriousness of the assent of faith means that his account cannot be simply identified with the position of Luther. But Catholics and Protestants can agree that faith in the relevant sense is sufficient for salvation, and they can unite against the ‘Pelagian’ view, insofar as both suppose that faith is not a human ‘achievement’, but depends upon the infusion of divine grace.

Many later Christian accounts of the nature of faith can be read as improvisations upon this broadly Thomistic conceptual framework. For instance, Søren Kierkegaard (2009: 168–69) maintains that faith cannot be grounded in the ‘approximation’ process, and the associated judgements of probability, that are characteristic of historical enquiry. Rather than being rooted in objective historical facts, to which we have only imperfect access, the unwavering character of the commitment of faith must instead be relative to the believer, Kierkegaard says, and their ‘passionate inwardness’ (Kierkegaard 1846/1992: 171). He puts this point by saying that, in matters of faith, ‘the objective uncertainty maintained through the appropriation in the most passionate inwardness is truth’. Although the tone of his account is very different from that of Aquinas, as when he speaks of the idea that ‘the eternal truth has come about in time’ as ‘the absurd’ (ibid. 177), Kierkegaard’s understanding of the Christian life shares with Aquinas’s the thought that the assent of faith cannot be the product of ratiocination, but must reflect a fundamental value commitment, and an associated movement of the will. Kierkegaard’s account invites a subjective rendering of the certainty of faith: faith’s certainty is rooted in the steadfastness of the commitment of faith which does not vary with fluctuations in the evidence in favour of religious belief (ibid. 169). By contrast, Thomas understands faith’s ‘certainty’ by reference to facts which are external to the believer’s will: such certainty rests ultimately on the trustworthiness of God. But even on this question, Thomas’s approach is not so different from Kierkegaard’s. After all, Thomas denies that faith is like ‘opinion’ which ‘decides for the one side [of a question] but with fear of the opposite’ (*ST* 2a2ae. 2. 1). Faith is free from such ‘fear’, Aquinas thinks, because it is grounded in the will’s confident movement. So, for Aquinas too, faith’s certainty can be understood, to this extent, in subjective terms.

Perhaps influenced by Kierkegaard, more recent writers have also regarded the steadfastness of the commitment of faith as one of its defining features. In his ‘Lectures on Religious Belief’, Wittgenstein remarks:

Suppose someone were a believer and said: ‘I believe in a Last Judgment’, and I said: ‘Well, I’m not so sure. Possibly.’ You would say that there is an enormous gulf between us. If he said ‘There is a German aeroplane overhead’, and I said ‘Possibly I’m not so sure’, you’d say we were fairly near.

(1966: 53)

These remarks suggest that religious beliefs are different from empirical beliefs insofar as they do not admit of doubt or uncertainty. Hence a person who doubts whether there is a Last Judgement,

for example, places themselves firmly outside the realm of a certain kind of conventional religious discourse. As with Kierkegaard and Aquinas, so here we might wonder about how this distinctively religious kind of certainty is to be understood. Like Aquinas, Wittgenstein supposes that religious conviction is in some way grounded in fundamental value judgements, rather than being the product of an inference. He develops the point in these terms:

Suppose someone is ill and he says: 'This is punishment', and I say: 'If I'm ill, I don't think of punishment at all.' If you say: 'Do you believe the opposite?'—you can call it believing the opposite, but it is entirely different from what we would normally call believing the opposite. I think differently, in a different way. I say different things to myself. I have different pictures.

(1966: 55)

These comments could be taken to imply that religious faith consists fundamentally in having certain attitudes towards the world, rather than its having any descriptive content of its own. And we might suppose that we can understand the certainty of faith accordingly: if it makes no factual claim, and if it is independent of any inference, then faith cannot be vulnerable to refutation; and in this sense, the commitment of faith will be certain.

Aquinas would of course agree that the assent of faith, when faith is 'formed', has its roots in a fundamental value commitment, rather than in the weight of evidence which can be mustered in support of an empirical hypothesis. And he would agree that such faith consists in part in a particular evaluation of worldly states of affairs, since it consists in part in a commitment to lead a certain sort of life here and now. But at the same time, Thomas would surely be readier to suppose than Wittgenstein seems to be here that religious belief does involve claims about the realm of 'fact', and not simply a commitment to a certain evaluation of the facts, or to adopting a particular practical-cum-spiritual demeanour in the face of the facts. And it is plausible to suppose that this is, once again, because he supposes that 'certainty' as it applies to religious faith is not simply a function of the human subject and the nature of their commitments. Religious faith is 'certain' not fundamentally because it lacks any empirical or factual content so that it is detached from all possibility of refutation; rather, its incapacity to fall into error is a consequence of the fact that it is grounded in the knowledge of God, which is communicated to the believer via a divinely-instituted, and error-proof, belief-forming process.

It seems likely that Wittgenstein was familiar with Thomas's account of faith, even if not at first hand. Indeed his discussion sometimes echoes Aquinas's in his choice of expression, as when he writes: 'one would be reluctant to say: "These people [religious people] rigorously hold the opinion (or view) that there is a Last Judgement". "Opinion" sounds queer' (Wittgenstein 1966: 56–57). For Aquinas too, as we have seen, religious faith is not a matter of 'opinion'. Wittgenstein follows Aquinas again when he distinguishes faith from 'science' or knowledge. Of course, by 'science', Wittgenstein means not Aristotelian science, as Thomas did, but science as an empirical, hypothesis-driven form of enquiry. Take for instance these remarks:

Father O'Hara is one of those people who make it a question of science. Here we have people who treat this evidence in a different way. They base things on evidence which taken in one way would seem exceedingly flimsy. They base enormous things on this evidence. Am I to say they are unreasonable? I wouldn't call them unreasonable. I would say, they are certainly not *reasonable*, that's obvious. ... What seems to me ludicrous about O'Hara is his making it to appear to be *reasonable*.

(1966: 57–58)

So Wittgenstein and Aquinas agree that religious faith is 'not reasonable'. But both would distinguish this thought from the thought that it is 'unreasonable': for both of them, faith does not rest fundamentally upon an inference, and *a fortiori* it is not the product of a shaky inference or 'blunder'. Aquinas and Wittgenstein put this sort of point by saying that while faith is not vulnerable to refutation as opinion is, neither is it properly counted as 'knowledge'. And in these matters, Wittgenstein follows Aquinas's usage, as well as the substance of his position. (Since we are dealing here with the transcripts of his lectures on religious belief, delivered in Cambridge, I take it that the terms 'opinion' and 'science' are the very terms that Wittgenstein used, corresponding to Aquinas's 'opinio' and 'scientia', when he remarks that faith occupies a kind of middle ground, between opinion and science.)

Wittgenstein's influence has continued to be felt in recent discussion. Here for example is D.Z. Phillips's route into these same questions:

If there is an analogy between the existence of God and the existence of unicorns, then coming to see that there is a God would be like coming to see that an additional being exists. 'I know what people are doing when they worship,' a philosopher might say. 'They praise, they confess, they thank, and they ask for things. The only difference between myself and religious believers is that I do not believe that there is a being who receives their worship.' The assumption, here, is that the meaning of worship is contingently related to the question whether there is a God or not. The assumption might be justified by saying that there need be no consequences of existential beliefs. Just as one can say, 'There is a planet Mars, but I couldn't care less', so one can say, 'There is a God, but I couldn't care less'. ... But all this is foreign to the question whether there is a God. That is not something anyone could *find out*. It has been far too readily assumed that the dispute between the believer and the unbeliever is over a *matter of fact*.

(Phillips 1970: 16–17)

So for Phillips, 'coming to see that there is a God' is to be distinguished from coming to see that there are unicorns, insofar as the first, but not the second, of its nature involves 'caring'. Moreover, the case of unicorns is different from the case of God since it concerns individual beings, and facts which one might in principle 'find out'. (Compare Winch 1977.) Again, this stance tracks certain claims in Aquinas. On Thomas's view, too, the assent of (formed) faith is essentially 'caring', since it is grounded in the will's attraction to God. And for Thomas, too, faith is not fundamentally the product of any inference from the empirical data, and does not concern some empirical fact, which one might 'find out'. Phillips's suggestion that God is not 'an additional being' can also be cast very readily in Thomistic terms if we recall Thomas's teaching that God is not so much an individual existent, as existence itself, or *ipsum esse subsistens* (ST 1a. 4. 2).

However, while for Thomas the assent of faith is not fundamentally an assent to a hypothesis of some sort, since it is not the product of an inference, the certainty which obtains here is not simply relative to the believer and the nature of her commitment. It is not that the believer's faith is certain because it does not admit of the possibility of refutation, since it has no empirical or factual content. For Aquinas, as we have seen, the certainty of faith is, rather, relative to God: the claims of faith are certainly true because grounded in the truthfulness of God.

On this 'externalist' reading of his thought, Aquinas's account is reminiscent of another central current of recent discussion in the philosophy of religion – not now the Wittgensteinian current, but the approach of 'reformed epistemology' as it has been developed in Plantinga's more recent work. Here is Plantinga's summary of John Calvin's account of religious faith:

Like the regeneration of which it is a part, faith is a gift; it is given to anyone who is willing to accept it. Faith, says Calvin, is ‘a firm and certain knowledge of God’s benevolence towards us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit’ (*Institutes* III, ii, 7). Faith therefore involves an explicitly cognitive element; it is, says Calvin, *knowledge* – knowledge of the availability of redemption and salvation through the person and work of Jesus Christ – and it is revealed to our minds. ... But ... faith also involves the will: it is ‘sealed upon our hearts’. By virtue of this sealing, the believer not only knows about the scheme of salvation God has prepared ... but is also heartily grateful to the Lord for it. ... Sealing, furthermore, also involves the *executive* function of the will: believers accept the proffered gift and commit themselves to the Lord, to conforming their lives to his will. ...

(Plantinga 2000: 244)

Here, as in Aquinas’s work, faith is said to depend upon the divine initiative, since it is a ‘gift’. But there is, it seems, this difference: Calvin considers faith to be a kind of ‘knowledge’, while for Aquinas, as we have seen, faith shares the certainty that is characteristic of knowledge, but at the same time resembles opinion, insofar as it ‘does not attain the perfection of clear sight’ that is characteristic of knowledge (*ST* 2a2ae 1). This difference is, I suggest, more terminological than substantive. Following Aristotle, Aquinas takes knowledge of a thing to be dependent upon the mind’s capacity to achieve ‘clear sight’ of the thing. And for Plantinga just as much as for Thomas, faith does not amount to knowledge in that sense. By contrast, for Plantinga, a belief will count as knowledge providing that it has sufficient ‘warrant’. And on this definition, and assuming that Calvin’s theological anthropology holds true, then the beliefs to which the Christian assents in faith will count as knowledge:

these beliefs will ... have *warrant* for believers: they will be produced in them by a belief-producing process that is functioning properly in an appropriate cognitive environment (the one for which they were designed), according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs.

(*ibid.* 246)

On this understanding of the conditions for ‘knowledge’, Aquinas would agree that faith counts as knowledge; for on his view, as on Plantinga’s, the assent of faith is the product of a belief-forming process which is, in the sense spelt out here, reliably aimed at truth. As we have seen, it is for this reason that Aquinas can affirm that faith is, objectively, ‘certain’. Plantinga and Aquinas also agree that where it concerns specifically Christian doctrinal claims, regarding for example the redemptive work of Christ, this divinely guaranteed belief-forming process requires more than the unaided unfolding of the natural cognitive endowments of human beings. (To put the point in Calvin’s terms, the assent which the believer gives to these claims cannot be understood simply in terms of the operation of the *sensus divinitatis* (*ibid.* 246, n. 10).) Moreover, for Plantinga (and Calvin), as for Aquinas, the assent of (formed) faith involves not only belief, but also a commitment of the believer evaluatively and practically, since this assent is ‘sealed upon her heart’ and engages ‘the executive function of the will’.

I commented above that, on Aquinas’s account, the assent of faith may seem to amount to a kind of wish-fulfilment. And I noted how his externalism about religious belief gives him one line of response to that objection. However, that response raises a further question: why should we grant that the movement of the will, in the assent of faith, does in fact track the nature of

things? In support of Aquinas on this point, we might recall his stance on the ontological argument. Thomas holds that this argument cannot function as a proof 'for us' (for human beings), since we do not have the requisite insight into the divine essence. But he also thinks that the cosmological argument gives us good reason to conclude that 'the proposition "God exists" is self-evident in itself, even if not 'for us' (*ST* 1a. 2. 1, in Davies and Leftow 2006). So on Aquinas's view, we can see that the ontological argument would be sound for a sufficiently powerful intellect; and accordingly, we can grasp that the supreme good necessarily exists, just because it is supremely good, or just by virtue of being 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived'. And if all of this is so, then we are right to suppose that when the will is drawn to affirm the reality of the supreme good, simply on account of its supreme attractiveness or supreme goodness, then the will's movements do in fact adhere to the fundamental structure of reality.¹ So here is one Thomistic kind of reason for thinking that the believer is entitled to trust the movement of the will, when it is drawn to affirm the articles of faith out of love of God.

An alternative and widely canvassed strategy would be to argue that there is a 'natural theological' case (a case independent of 'revelation') for supposing that there is a God, and for supposing that God would choose to be revealed to human beings, and to be revealed by way of certain confirmatory signs in particular (see King, R. 2008). If all of that is so, then perhaps the claim of a given tradition to be founded upon a divinely authorised 'revelation' can be established relatively straightforwardly, when the form and content of that 'revelation' conform to these rational expectations? (See Swinburne 2007.)

Given Aquinas's position, it would be a mistake for believers to seek a comprehensive rebuttal of the wish-fulfilment charge. After all, if the believer were to have compelling evidence that God is active to produce the relevant beliefs in her, then her assent to the propositions of faith would cease to be free and meritorious. It is also clear that for Aquinas, revelation does not need to be buttressed by appeal to natural theological argument. Take for example this remark: 'That science capable of proving God's existence and other such matters about him is the last to be studied, many other sciences being presupposed to it. Consequently, without faith a person would come to a knowledge about God only late in life' (*ST* 2a2ae. 2. 4). Here Thomas seems to propose that it is not only truths about God's purposes that can be revealed, but also the very existence of God (compare Marshall 2005).

Another response to the question of whether the believer is entitled to assent to the propositions of faith might concentrate not so much on the volume of evidence she can assemble (by appeal to natural theological considerations, for example), but on the modest nature of the believer's creedal claims – which may suggest that these claims do not require very much evidential support. For example, it may be said that in affirming the articles of the Nicene creed, the Christian need not be maintaining that the conjunction of those articles is more probable than not. That would be, after all, a pretty ambitious claim, given that any one of these articles, as formulated in the precise language of the creed, might turn out to be false. And for this reason among others, we may doubt whether, historically, Christians have typically taken themselves to be claiming that much when they have affirmed the creed. More plausibly, we might suppose that in assenting to, say, the Nicene creed, Christians have intended to affirm that the Christian world-view, considered in the round, is more likely than any one of its rivals. And saying that is quite compatible with supposing that the Christian world-view, as articulated in the creed, has overall a probability of less than 0.5; indeed, it is compatible with supposing that some creedal items have a probability of less than 0.5. It may be that there has been a shift in attitudes on these questions, and that the rise of agnosticism in recent centuries reflects, in part, a change in view about what a person is committed to when they affirm the claims of the Christian or some other creed (Swinburne 2005: 151–57). Perhaps we moderns are

more inclined to suppose that to affirm a creed is to maintain that the world-view which it expounds is overall more probable than not – and not simply more probable than any competing world-view?

If we do suppose that the believer is committed only to the claim that the articles of faith are more probable than those propounded by any one rival world-view, and not more probable than not, then we might conclude that the believer does not require all that much evidence if her assent to the articles of faith is to be epistemically responsible. (Certainly, she will not need as much evidence as would be required were she to maintain that her world-view is overall more probable than not.) And on this basis, the believer might argue that the assent of faith is capable of meeting the fairly limited epistemic requirements that are appropriate to it.

If we suppose that the assent of faith requires, from an epistemic point of view, only the judgement that the relevant world-view is more probable than any one of its alternatives, then we might conclude that in fact many of us find ourselves in this position with respect to some world-view or other: many of us are apt to suppose that the Christian world-view, or the naturalist world-view (specified at an appropriate level of detail), or some other world-view, is more probable than any one of its alternatives. But this is not yet to say that most of us are people of ‘faith’. If we follow Aquinas, then we will say that to give an assent of ‘faith’ to a given world-view, we must also align ourselves in evaluative terms with the world-view (at least to the extent of supposing that its truth would be overall good), and at the same time we must commit ourselves practically to that view, by undertaking to lead the sort of life that would be fitting if it were true. (Compare Alston 2007.)

This account may throw some light on Aquinas’s claim that the assent of faith involves ‘belief’, while remaining voluntary. We might well wonder: how can beliefs be produced at will? (Evidently, I cannot simply choose to believe that the book in front of me now has a red rather than a blue cover.) In response we might say: the assent of faith is voluntary insofar as its evaluative and, especially, its practical components are subject to the will. This is not evidently Thomas’s own view, but it is one way of drawing out what he says on these matters so that it will fit with one modern and widely held view of the nature of belief. On this account, we can allow that beliefs are not directly answerable to the will, but still suppose that the assent of faith can be ‘commanded’, insofar as the evaluative and practical commitments of the act of faith are subject to the will.

While we may not be able to choose our beliefs at will, there is, in general, no difficulty in the idea that we might choose to investigate the truth of a given belief. Suppose that a person who is at first unable to believe the articles of the Christian faith chooses to investigate the truth of those beliefs; and suppose that she comes to believe them when her enquiries produce evidence in their support. If this person embarked on her investigation in the hope of uncovering evidence in support of the Christian faith, then we might say that her newly acquired Christian belief is in a sense voluntary, insofar as it derives from a freely initiated enquiry, and insofar as her wanting to believe partly explains the fact that she undertook that enquiry. If that is so, then we can speak of the assent of faith as voluntary not only because it has a practical and evaluative component, but also insofar as beliefs are, in these respects, indirectly subject to the will.

I have been considering some of the ways in which Aquinas’s account of faith (or in general, the traditional Christian account of faith) may be subject to various kinds of modulation and extension. Relative to what Aquinas says, we can vary our understanding by affirming a rather different, and more subjective, account of the nature of faith’s certainty, or by re-assessing the question of whether faith is sufficient for salvation, or constitutes knowledge, or is concerned with ‘facts’, or is voluntary, or is susceptible to the objection from ‘wish-fulfilment’. Some of these later accounts, I have suggested, differ from Aquinas only terminologically, rather than

substantively, while others appear to emphasise or elaborate upon some strands of his account, while bracketing out, or in some cases actively denying, others.

Beyond Aquinas

I want to conclude by looking at some recent accounts of the nature of faith which, while they share something of the structure of Aquinas's account, seem to move beyond the Thomistic scheme, above all insofar as they are no longer tied to the thought that faith consists fundamentally in an assent to the propositions of faith as these are laid down in the Christian scriptures and associated creeds. Here we are concerned with accounts which have a rather different understanding of what Aquinas would have called the 'material object' of the assent of faith.

Given the rise of historical criticism in biblical studies, many modern commentators have doubted whether the Christian scriptures are capable of providing even modest evidential support for fundamental Christian creedal claims, concerning for example the resurrection, or the idea of incarnation (Hick 1989/2004). Some philosophers of religion have sought to intervene in this debate, arguing that the sceptical tendencies of some modern biblical scholarship reflect not so much sound historical judgement, but either: a failure to reckon with the question of whether the books of the Bible might be taken, quite reasonably, to have been authorized as a 'work', or collection of works, by God, so that their sense is to be read accordingly (Wolterstorff 1995 and 2009a); or else a tendency to adopt unreflectively an atheistic metaphysic and an associated epistemology (Plantinga 2009; Swinburne 2009); or an unexamined commitment to philosophically substantive and contestable assumptions about the nature of human story-telling (Stump 2009).

But bracketing these issues, we might wonder whether the notion of 'faith', understood in a broadly Thomistic sense, might still have some application if we set aside the claim of the Christian scriptures, and associated creeds, to provide a proper account of the material object of faith. Famously, Immanuel Kant maintained that he was denying knowledge in order to make room for 'faith' (1787, preface). 'Faith' in this context turns out to involve the postulation of God's existence as a condition of taking seriously the realm of moral obligation (1788). Some modern commentators have followed Kant in this endeavour of seeing the claim that there is a God as not so much provable by natural theology, as presupposed in our practical commitments, and especially in our moral relations to other human beings. Some have argued, for example, that it is only if there is a God that we can make sense of the apparently categorical character of moral obligations (Mavrodes 1986/2008; Graham 2009), while others have thought that Christian discourse, and especially the idea that God's love is an unconditional, parental love, has had an important part to play in enabling the example of saintly love, upon which we depend for our appreciation of our 'common humanity' (Gaita 2000). In a similar vein, John Cottingham has argued that particular ideals of character, such as those of humility, wonder, gratitude, and hope, only really make sense given the right 'background of significance', and that Christian theism, or more generally monotheism of the relevant kind, is therefore presupposed if these traits are to count as virtues (Cottingham 2009a; contrast Wielenberg 2005, Russell 1903/2002, Cooper 2002).

In all of these ways, religious faith (or at least, if we follow Gaita, the thought-world of religion) can be seen as presupposed in our moral commitments. These accounts, like Aquinas's, root faith in an evaluative commitment (and especially in a moral commitment); and accordingly, they see religious conviction as closely allied to a certain ideal of life. They differ from Aquinas above all insofar as they do not start from the Christian revelation's account of the ultimate end of human life, working from there to a conception of what sort of life is fitting for

human beings here and now. Rather, they tend to proceed in the other direction, from a conception of the good human life here and now, to a conception of what metaphysical conditions must obtain if that ideal of life is to be genuinely an ideal, or to be motivationally plausible, or to be in some other way fully coherent. (Compare Pierre Hadot's claim that 'philosophical discourse' in ancient philosophy was in the service of a certain way of life (Hadot 1995).) At the same time, this contrast should not be too sharply drawn, for on Aquinas's own account, our assent to the Christian vision of the end of human life, in the beatific vision, is rooted in a movement of the will, and accordingly this assent does not simply ground a view of how we ought to live, but is itself dependent upon a conception of the nature of a worthwhile human life.

These attempts to ground religious faith in moral terms often proceed from the thought that religious belief and unbelief are alike unprovable (compare R.M. Hare's representation of religious belief as a kind of 'blik': Flew, Hare and Mitchell 1955). If that is so, and if there are significant practical (including moral) benefits to following a religious way of life, then perhaps we have pragmatic, rather than epistemic, grounds for faith? William James's 'Will to Believe' (1896) remains the classic formulation of a case of this kind, and similar views have been defended in the modern literature (Bishop 2007). For some, Jamesian religious faith is more a matter of acting 'as if' religious beliefs were true, rather than a case of genuine faith, since he seems to be committed to the epistemic parity of religious and non-religious construals of the world. But if the assent of faith on the traditional account need not involve the claim that the Christian world-view is overall more probable than not, then it might be argued that Jamesian faith is not after all so different from traditional faith, insofar as both fall short of affirming that the relevant world-view is overall probable.

John Hick's pluralistic account of religious faith also proceeds from the claim that the differences between the religions cannot be settled by argument, or by appeal to some sacred text. He argues that religious faith is to be understood as a kind of 'seeing-as', and that all of the major faith traditions have an equal claim to provide a religiously authentic vehicle for experiencing the one fundamental reality, which Hick designates in tradition-neutral terms as 'the Real'. This one reality is differently experienced in different traditions, insofar as it is manifest as, or 'seen as', a Trinity in the context of orthodox Christianity, or as a non-dual ultimate in certain forms of Hinduism, and so on. (See, for example, Hick 1989/2004.) One evident difficulty for this approach is that its avowed realism about the ultimate object of religious experience sits rather uncomfortably with its insistence that the content of religious experience derives entirely from the side of culture, rather than from the nature of 'the Real' (Byrne 2000).

Future discussion of the practical significance and rational point of religious faith could constructively bring together a number of the themes that we have been discussing. Following Aquinas, we may be interested to know what it is about the religious conception of life that is attractive, and that can elicit a corresponding movement of the will. And following recent 'moral' defences of religious faith, we may be interested to know what it is about the religious way of life here and now (and not simply what it is about the prospect of the beatific vision) that properly engages the will. And following Hick, we might suppose that specifying the attractiveness of the religious way of life will depend upon noticing the particular forms of 'experiencing as' which are enabled by religious concepts and practices. But contrary to Hick, and more like the Wittgensteinians in this respect, we may be more interested in the question of how the everyday material world (rather than 'the Real') may be differently experienced, and differently engaged in practical terms, when we commit ourselves to using distinctively religious concepts. (For an investigation of this kind, see Wynn 2009 and 2013.) In these ways, the Thomistic account of faith continues to pose some vital questions for our own time: what is the

practical import of the Christian, and other, metaphysical schemes? And in what ways are various religious ideals of life attractive, or unattractive, plausible or implausible, as renderings of human possibilities? In addressing these questions, we may hope to come to a clearer appreciation of the meaning and the rational sense, if any, of religious faith.

Note

- 1 I am grateful to Edward Skidelsky for drawing my attention to the relevance of the Ontological Argument here.

13

RELIGIOUS DISAGREEMENT

Bryan Frances

In this chapter, I try to motivate and formulate the main *epistemological questions* to ask about the phenomenon of religious disagreement. I will not spend much time going over proposed answers to those questions. I start with some fiction and then, hopefully, proceed with something that has at least a passing acquaintance with truth.

Introduction

In R. Scott Bakker's novel *The Warrior-Prophet*, Achamian is a sorcerer who is occasionally hired by kings to tutor their sons in academic subjects such as history, composition, and mathematics (but not sorcery, the education of which is closely guarded). One of Achamian's students, Prince Proyas, becomes a king as a relatively young man. Achamian is skeptical about the epistemic lives of most people. Proyas, affectionately known as Prosha, grows to be a fervent believer in the established religion of his time and culture. As an adult, Proyas reflects on his childhood education under Achamian:

Beliefs were the foundation of actions. Those who believed without doubting, he would say, acted without thinking. And those who acted without thinking were enslaved.

That was what Achamian would say.

Once, after listening to his beloved older brother, Tirummas, describe his harrowing pilgrimage to the Sacred Land, Proyas had told Achamian how he wished to become a Shiral Knight.

'Why?' the portly Schoolman [Achamian] had exclaimed. ...

'So I can kill heathens on the Empire's frontier!'

Achamian tossed his hands skyward in dismay. 'Foolish boy! How many faiths are there? How many competing beliefs? And you would *murder* another on the slender hope that yours is somehow the *only* one?'

'Yes! I have *faith*!'

'Faith', the Schoolman repeated, as though recalling the name of a hated foe. 'Ask yourself, Prosha ... What if the choice isn't between certainties, between this faith and that, but between faith and *doubt*? Between renouncing the mystery and embracing it?'

‘But doubt is weakness!’ Proyas cried. ‘Faith is strength! Strength!’ Never, he was convinced, had he felt so holy as at that moment. The sunlight seemed to shine straight through him, to bathe his heart.

‘Is it? Have you looked around you, Prosha? Pay attention, boy. Watch and tell me how many men, out of weakness, *lapse* into the practice of doubt. Listen to those around you, and tell me what you see ...’

He did exactly as Ahamian had asked. For several days, he watched and listened. ... And in the midst of innumerable boasts, declarations, and accusations, only rarely did he hear those words Ahamian had made so familiar, so commonplace ... The words Proyas himself found so difficult! And even then, they belonged most to those Proyas considered wise, even-handed, compassionate, and least to those he thought stupid or malicious.

‘*I don’t know.*’

Why were these words so difficult?

‘Because men want to murder,’ Ahamian had explained afterward. ‘Because men want their gold and their glory. Because they want beliefs that *answer* to their fears, their hatreds, and their hungers.’

(Bakker, R. (2004) *The Warrior Prophet New York: Overlook*, 74–75)

This excerpt contains several ideas regarding our topic. First, Ahamian seems to be saying that Proyas would be foolish to be so confident in his religion that he would go and kill the heathens with respect to that religion. Ahamian’s offered reason for doubt appears to be the diversity of religions. In response, Proyas thinks having faith is enough justification for those murders. He seems to think that one simply must have *some* worthwhile religion, and any worthwhile religion will demand the murder of its opponents. Ahamian replies that one does not have to choose among the various murderous religions; agnosticism, which means embracing the mystery of the universe without corresponding belief, or at least murderous belief, is a genuine alternative. Proyas responds with the accusation that such agnosticism goes hand in hand with weakness. Ahamian disagrees. Under Ahamian’s recommendation Proyas then observes that doubt appears to be both favorably linked with wisdom, compassion, and even-handedness, and opposed to stupidity and maliciousness. Doubt no longer looks like it’s linked with weakness. Ahamian has a harsh diagnosis: those who adopt confident religious beliefs, at least those that recommend murder, do so out of fear, hatred, and hunger – not anything like evidence.

I think every reader of this chapter will go along with most of what Ahamian has to say. One should not be so confident in the truth of a religion that tells one to murder the heathens. If your faith is telling you to bomb an abortion clinic, for instance, it’s time to reassess those beliefs, as one needs to be pretty darn sure of one’s beliefs before one goes around murdering people.

So much is obvious to enlightened folk, many of whom are happy to adopt less violent religious beliefs. But Ahamian’s basic point applies to those beliefs as well: How can you justify any religious belief at all, pro *or* con, given that you know full well that there are a great many highly intelligent and well informed people who reject that belief? The religious belief might be something relatively specific, such as ‘Jesus rose from the dead’, ‘Salvation occurs only through Jesus’, or ‘The soul is reincarnated’. Or it might be something more fundamental, such as ‘God exists’. It could be something scientific such as ‘Humans were created in pretty much their present form in the last few thousand years’, ‘There is no afterlife for humans’, or ‘The earth was covered in water several thousand years ago’. It could also be opposing beliefs: ‘Jesus didn’t rise from the dead’, ‘Salvation can occur through non-Christian means’, ‘God doesn’t exist at all’, or ‘Humans evolved over a great many millennia’. Even if in *some* cases apparent disagreement

is merely apparent – e.g., so-called disagreements about ‘salvation’ might be artifacts of different understandings of that term – it’s clear that in an enormous number of cases only one group can be right: Jesus either rose from the dead or he didn’t, we either are or are not conscious after the death of our bodies, and either a person created the physical universe or no one did. In each case, if you aren’t culturally sheltered, then you are perfectly aware that there are many very intelligent people who disagree with you. What makes you think you and your co-believers are right and all those other folks are wrong? Is your group smarter or more careful in its reasoning? Does your group have key evidence the other group lacks – and if you think that’s the case, then how do you know they don’t have key evidence that you lack? Has your group evaded some bit of irrationality that infects the other group? If you think your group has got the issue right, and everyone who disagrees has got it wrong, you probably think that your group has some epistemic advantage the other group fails to have – but do you?

It can be difficult to be rationally confident in answering those questions in the previous paragraph in a way that reflects happily on oneself. In particular, it will often be difficult if you are familiar with the diversity of, and epistemic credentials of members of, religious viewpoints. Suppose I have the following beliefs: God exists, Jesus is God, and some of us have eternal life in Heaven. I know perfectly well that there are a great many philosophers who have examined the publicly available evidence for these claims and have found it highly defective; indeed, many think the evidence against my beliefs is very strong. In fact, I’m aware that a clear majority have this skeptical view about my religious beliefs. I am not oblivious, living under a rock; and I am not in denial, fooling myself with wishful thinking. I know perfectly well that my religious beliefs are highly controversial in the uncomfortable way: they are denied by a great number and percentage of the *best thinkers around* who have studied the publicly available information that might be relevant to the rational assessment of my beliefs.

Despite all that, I think it’s pretty clear that a great many people are utterly reasonable in sticking to their beliefs in the face of religious disagreement – in one familiar sense of ‘reasonable’. For instance, a child with religious belief *B* might be told by her parents and *all* the other people she looks up to that although there are people who doubt or even reject *B*, they are screwed up in any of various ways: horribly irrational, biased, brainwashed, ignorant, insane, etc. She believes them on this score; why on earth would she not do so given that she is sheltered from reality, she has always unreflectively trusted those adults, and those adults have proven reliable about so many issues before? She has a false belief – it’s far from true that all those people are screwed up in those ways – but she is completely reasonable in accepting it and then, as a consequence, sticking with her belief in *B*. Nothing relevant changes if the believer is a sheltered adult instead of a child. Neither is this verdict dependent on the belief being a pro-religious one: it applies to atheism and other anti-religious views.

Those are the easy cases. Of course, we still have the task of telling an informative story about the kind of reasonability in question – the kind that applies to her sticking with her belief in *B*. The kind of reasonableness the child has means we can’t truthfully accuse her with the charges ‘she should know better’ and ‘if she doesn’t change her view, then she’s being foolish’. The child has strong testimony that there is good experiential, scientific, or philosophical evidence for her religious beliefs; more simply, she just has strong testimony for the truth of her theistic beliefs. Note that the testimony suffices for an ordinary type of epistemic reasonableness in her beliefs *independently of the testimony’s origin*, where the origin might be someone who directly perceived God but also might be someone who was insane and deluded. For comparison, even if the whole idea of electrons and protons is a stunningly successful and long-running gag perpetrated by generations of twisted physicists and chemists, it remains true that, in ordinary senses of ‘testimony’ and ‘epistemically reasonable’, we non-scientists have excellent

testimony for our shared belief that atoms contain electrons and protons – testimony good enough to make our belief reasonable in an epistemically robust manner.

Awareness of religious disagreement

The topic of religious disagreement gets most interesting when the believer isn't sheltered. She need not actually *meet* anyone who disagrees with her. Instead, her problems often begin with a simple train of thought that can be expressed as follows.

Hang on. There are loads of religions out there: dozens and dozens if you separate different kinds of Christianity, Buddhism, etc. They can't all be right: they conflict in many ways. If the Catholics are right about *X*, then the Protestants are wrong about *X* and the Buddhists are so far off it's almost comical. How do I know mine is the right one? I think Jesus rose from the dead; lots of other people say he didn't; we can't both be right! Of all the dozens of religious views out there, how do I know I've managed to latch on to the right one? Is it okay [practically? morally? epistemically?] for me to just *have faith* or *hope* that I've got the true one?

As soon as one is well aware of and reflects seriously on the diversity of religious opinion, pro and con, one is put in what looks to be an epistemically uncomfortable position. *If* one manages to rationally come to think that the folks on the other side are the epistemic inferiors to the folks on one's home team (one's home team is the people who share one's belief), *then* one usually can be reasonable in sticking to one's religious belief. For instance, I am rationally confident that Hell is not located in the center of Earth, even though that belief might be quite controversial among 10-year-olds who have been brought up in certain primitive religious communities. The problem, of course, is that the more worldly one becomes, the harder it is to always rationally think that one's home team has the advantage over the people one disagrees with. And please keep in mind that this applies to atheists as well as theists.

Let's look a little more carefully at how awareness of religious disagreement usually comes about, focusing on pro-religious belief. In most cases, one acquires the pro-religious belief *B* via testimony when one is young, where: (i) the testimony comes from people one would regard as one's superiors on the matter (for one thing, they are adults); and (ii) one learns pretty quickly that *a great many people* have that belief *B*, usually including many people one would judge to be one's epistemic superiors on the belief. It is usually later that one learns of people who disbelieve *B*, and this realization has several distinct stages. First, one learns of other religions – ones that differ from one's own. That's stage 1. Next, one learns that these other religions have different beliefs: whereas mine has beliefs *B1* and *B2*, that other one has beliefs *B3* and *B4*. That's stage 2. Note that these are different stages: there could be religions that differed in numerous significant ways but had the same beliefs. (In fact, I suspect that many people don't consider beliefs to be central to religions.) Third, one learns that the other religion denies what one's own religion affirms: we think their *B3* is false, and they think our *B1* is false. That's stage 3. So, finally, the person becomes aware of religious disagreement as such: we can't all be right in our religious beliefs, so someone is wrong. These stages might all occur in one conversation, but then again their unfolding might occur over a span of years; it depends on the child's intellectual sophistication and curiosity, as well as the remarks of her interlocutors. And when one learns about the disagreement, one typically learns that there are *a great many* people who disbelieve *B* (e.g., one learns of multiple *world* religions). When you disagree with your sister about which relative played the piano at your grandmother's house when you were

little children, there is a *disagreement-with-one* case; religious disagreement is virtually always a *disagreement-with-many* case.

Finally, after reaching stage 3, one *can* proceed to the ‘Wait a minute’ stage 4 – but this doesn’t always happen. Even at stage 3, the problem of religious disagreement might not arise with much force. A great many Catholics, for instance, will acknowledge that there are millions of people who think the central tenets of Catholicism are false, but *no reflection at all* goes along with that knowledge. The same holds for other faiths of course. (This can be difficult to comprehend for philosophers, since they are hyper-reflective.) Only when the ‘Wait a minute: how do we know we’re right and they’re wrong?’ attitude passes through one’s consciousness with some force does the epistemic challenge become acute – or at least has the *potential* for being such.

If my students (at Fordham University, which has academically inclined students) are at all representative, then the ‘Wait a minute’ stage 4 of awareness is fairly uncommon. For what it’s worth, when I teach the topic, I encounter a large percentage of students who by their atypical blank stares have clearly not reached stage 4 even though they have managed to reach stage 3. Just because the challenge of religious disagreement has been served on a silver platter does not mean that people will catch a whiff of it. From now on I will address only those people who have reached the ‘Wait a minute’ stage of awareness and reflection.

One natural thing to do upon reflecting on disagreement is wonder whether your group has some advantage over the disagreeing group. For instance, although I think that global warming is happening, I know that there are many people who disagree with me. I stick with my belief in the face of disagreement because I think my group – the group of people who agree with me – is more likely than the opposing group to have come up with the right answer to ‘Is global warming happening?’ For one thing, my group has much better epistemic credentials regarding the relevant topics. Here is another apt example: although I think Jones is going to win the political election, and I base this belief on my readings of sophisticated statistical analysis of many polls, I know that many prominent political pundits disagree with me based on their alleged insider knowledge of how the election is going. Even so, I rationally stick with my belief because I rationally think the statisticians are more likely to get the right answer than the pundits. Similarly, I might think Jesus is the Messiah because I think Christians ‘know something others have missed’, where that phrase indicates some crucial piece of evidence (e.g., I think Christians have had personal experiences of Jesus that suggest he’s the Messiah).

However, it’s not true that in all cases of reflective religious disagreement the person who sticks with her belief after significant reflection thinks that her group is better positioned to judge *B*. There are a couple of other categories of cases to consider for the person who reaches stage 4.

Category 1: You think that your group is in a significantly *better position* to judge *B* correctly compared to the disagreeing group.

Category 2: You think your group is roughly just as likely to judge *B* correctly as the disagreeing group.

Category 3: You have thought about the better position issue but realize that you have no idea which group has the advantage.

Primary questions about religious disagreement

With respect to each category there are at least two questions worth asking, one epistemological and one social:

- **The Disagreement Question:** Suppose a person in that category reflects intelligently on the fact that her religious belief *B* (pro or con) is rejected by a huge number of people – many

of which she knows to be intelligent, sane, and informed. She also realizes that her belief is endorsed by yet another huge number of intelligent, sane, and informed people. Suppose further that after reflecting about it (via the ‘Wait a minute’ idea) she sticks with her belief *B*. One question is this: Is this *intellectual response* to the realization of disagreement reasonable (assuming, if you like, that her belief *B* started out reasonable)?

- **The Frequency Question:** How often do the religious disagreements we find pressing for personal, political, or social reasons fall into the category in question?

To be sure, there are other philosophically worthwhile questions to ask, such as ‘If someone satisfies the description in the (first three sentences of the) Disagreement Question, how should she *behave* towards people who disagree with her and who she respects?’, ‘If someone satisfies the description in the Disagreement Question, and her belief was *justified* or amounted to *knowledge* beforehand, is it justified or does it amount to knowledge afterwards, assuming she retains that belief?’, ‘If someone satisfies the description in the Disagreement Question, is her belief retention *wise*?’ This chapter treats only the matter of the *epistemic reasonability* of the retaining of belief.

It’s easy to misunderstand the Disagreement Question. Consider a case in which a person starts out with a belief that is irrational (e.g., her overall evidence suggests it’s false, not true; and she believes it based on wishful thinking), obtains some new relevant evidence concerning that belief, responds to that new evidence in a completely reasonable way, and yet ends up with an irrational belief.

Bub believes *J*, that *Japan is a totalitarian state*, despite his poor evidence, because he has a raging, irrational bias that rules his views on this topic. His ‘evidence’ regarding Japan is what he reads about it, and what he reads certainly does not suggest that Japan is a totalitarian state. He has let his bias ruin his thinking on the matter. Then he gets some new information: some Japanese police have been caught on film beating government protestors. After hearing this, Bub retains his old confidence level in *J*.

I take it that when Bub learns about the police, he has not acquired some new information that should make him think ‘Wait a minute; maybe I’m wrong about Japan’. He shouldn’t lose confidence in his belief *J* merely because he learned some facts that do not cast any doubt on his belief!

The initial lesson of this story: *Bub’s action of not lowering his confidence in his belief as a result of his new knowledge is reasonable even though his retained belief itself is unreasonable*. Bub’s assessment of the original evidence concerning *J* was irrational, but his reaction to the new information was rational; his subsequent belief in *J* was (still) irrational. The question, ‘Is Bub being rational after he got his new knowledge?’ has two reasonable interpretations: ‘Is his retained belief in *J* rational after his acquisition of new knowledge?’ (answer: no, as his total evidence is still quite unsupportive of *J*) vs. ‘Is his response to the new knowledge rational?’ (answer: yes, as he was given no reason to lower his confidence in *J*).

The question ‘What does rationality demand when one discovers disagreement (or learns some other relevant information)?’ is a *bad* question: it’s ambiguous and, crucially, the ambiguity is important – it *matters*. On the one hand, ‘rationality demands’ that upon his acquisition of new knowledge Bub drop his belief *J* that Japan is a totalitarian state: after all, his overall evidence for it is very weak. On the other hand, ‘rationality demands’ that upon his acquisition of new knowledge Bub keep his belief *J* *given that he has not revisited the basis of his old belief and he has not received any new reason to revise that belief*. This situation still might strike you as odd. After all, we’re saying that Bub is being rational in keeping an irrational belief! But no: that’s not

what we're saying. The statement 'Bub is being rational' is ambiguous: Is it saying that Bub's retained belief *J* is rational? Or is it saying that Bub's retaining of that belief was irrational? The sentence can take on either meaning, and the two meanings end up with different verdicts: the retained belief is irrational, but the retaining of the belief is rational.

Therefore, we have to distinguish two questions about the acquisition of new information such as that regarding disagreement:

- After you acquire some new information relevant to a certain belief *B* of yours, what should your new level of confidence in *B* be in order for *your new level of confidence regarding B* to be rational?
- After you acquire some new information relevant to a certain belief *B* of yours, what should your new level of confidence in *B* be in order for *your response to the new information* to be rational?

The latter question concerns an *intellectual action* (an intellectual response to the acquisition of new information), whereas the former question concerns the *subsequent level of confidence* itself, the new confidence level you end up with, which comes about as a causal result of the intellectual action.

For my money, the rationality of the intellectual action of belief retaining is the main issue in the epistemology of disagreement; the question of the rationality of the subsequent confidence level in the retained belief is less important.

Recent epistemology

Epistemologists have recently looked at a variety of disagreement cases, not limited to religion. For instance, there has been a great deal of work on the *epistemic peer problem* (e.g., Feldman 2006, Kelly 2006, Elga 2007, Christensen 2007, Lackey 2010a and 2010b, Frances 2012), which can be formulated thus:

You believe *B*, and you don't know what Jones thinks about *B*. You then come to think that Jones is *just as likely as you* to have correctly figured out *B*'s truth-value. You may think this because you believe all of the following: Jones is about as smart as you are, Jones is about as informed as you are regarding the topics relevant to *B*, Jones has all your evidence and you have all her evidence, you and Jones are about the same when it comes to relevant biases, and Jones has thought about *B* for about as long as you have and under about the same quality of circumstances. (Alternatively, you think you surpass Jones on some of those factors but she makes up for it by surpassing you on other factors, so you still come out about even.) And then you learn that she thinks *B* is false, whereas you had concluded that *B* is true. Given that you already judged her to be your epistemic equal when it comes to figuring out whether *B* is true, should you now trust your judgment over hers and stick with your belief in *B*? Or should you suspend judgment? Or should you just lower your confidence in *B* – and if so, by how much?

Articles have been written on the peer problem by instantiating *B* with various religious claims (e.g., Kraft 2007, Feldman 2007, Oppy 2010, Thune 2010, Audi 2011, DePoe 2011, Lackey forthcoming, Bogardus forthcoming). Although these cases are theoretically interesting, in my view it is tricky to apply the theoretical issues of interest to epistemologists to the *real-life* cases of

religious disagreement. There are several primary reasons for this, each of which throws light on the epistemology of the types of religious disagreement that are actually most common.

First, most of the pressing cases of religious disagreements are many-on-many, not one-on-one as is suggested by the recent epistemology literature. If I'm Jewish and I wonder whether the Christians are right about Jesus being the Messiah, I'm going to consider whether *we Jews* have some evidence or some other factor that gives us an advantage over *the Christians*. I won't be concerned whether *I* happen to have an advantage over *my neighbor* who is Lutheran.

Second, in an enormous number of cases people think, at least implicitly, that their group is in a better position to judge *B*. I will think that my group knows something the critics have missed (e.g., we Christians have experienced Jesus in a certain epistemically fruitful way; we atheists understand science and critical thinking better than theists). So an enormous number of religious disagreements won't be recognized peer cases on either an individual or group basis. In another large number of cases people realize that they have no idea which group is better positioned (e.g., on how to interpret the book Genesis). Hence, focusing on the peer category 2 makes one miss the enormous number of cases in the other two categories (the two: 'We are better positioned' and 'I have no idea who is better positioned'). And don't forget the many millions of people who don't reflect at all on the fact of disagreement, beyond merely noting that religions disagree on some matters. In my judgment, the peer category 2 is small compared to the others.

Third, for the central religious belief – 'God exists' – it's arguable that the vast majority of people will insist that they are in the better position to judge the belief (and as a result these disagreements will fall into category 1, not 2). A great many theists will think that the atheists are just missing out on experiencing God; the atheists will generally think the theists have let any of a variety of epistemic weaknesses infect their judgment. I'll examine this phenomenon in the next section.

Fourth, although there are category 2 cases of peer disagreement when it comes to religion, the notion of peerhood has to be extremely loose, allowing for a great deal of difference in the two groups, in order for there to be a significant number of category 2 cases. For instance, two disagreeing theists might consider themselves peers over whether Jesus really raised anyone from the dead, whether an afterlife Heaven really exists, whether evolution is true, whether God is really perfectly good, whether God ever changes, whether salvation occurs through Jesus or other means, whether the Pope's decisions and views are substantially influenced by God, etc. However, in those real-life cases I doubt whether people often have any opinion regarding 'peerhood' beyond that expressed by 'Well, I figure we're very roughly equal'. They probably won't think the two groups have the *same evidence* or are equal on other epistemically relevant factors such as time devoted to the issue, intellectual ability, relevant background knowledge, and circumstances of investigation. How would anyone ever have good reason to think two groups are about equal on those factors when it comes to religious beliefs? Not only that: it's not difficult to realize that humans are extremely diverse in their exposure to arguments, experiences, and evidence, pro and con, regarding religious claims; they are also diverse in general intellectual qualities; finally, the amount of time spent in relevant reflection will vary greatly as well (in addition to varying in qualities such as intensity).

This chapter will not address the question of whether religious beliefs typically, or ever, *start out* rational or overall justified, before the realization of and reflection upon disagreement. For the sake of argument I will assume that both theistic and atheistic beliefs very often start out epistemically rational and even overall justified (in any of several senses of those terms).

I will now comment on the first two categories defined earlier, omitting the third due to space limitations.

Category 1: we are the epistemic superiors

I begin with category 1, in which the protagonist thinks her group is in a much better position to judge *B*. If after going through the ‘Wait a minute’ idea I come to firmly believe that my group is in a much better position to judge whether *B* is true, then by and large it will be reasonable for me to stick to my belief *B* as a consequence to making that comparative judgment. So it’s arguable that the answer to the Disagreement Question will be ‘yes’. This kind of situation breaks down into two species: my belief in my group’s superiority *may or may not* be well supported by my overall evidence. In the ‘may’ case it seems pretty clear that at least in most cases my sticking with *B* will be reasonable (it will be similar to the global warming case mentioned above).

What is surprising is that the same might be true for the ‘may not’ case. To be sure, the person who sticks with *B* when *unreasonably* thinking her group is in the superior position has made an epistemic error; that’s logically true. But her error isn’t in the retaining of the belief: it’s in the *prior* judgment of superiority. *Given that* she has made the unreasonable judgment of superiority, the reasonable thing for her to do next, in updating her position on *B*, is stick with *B*. If someone believes *B*, she knows that many others disbelieve *B*, she is quite convinced that she has absolutely key evidence that the others lack, and she is convinced that the others have no relevant epistemic advantage over her, then she would be irrational to suspend judgment just because those people disagree with her. The rational thing for her to do is stick with her belief, even though her *retained belief* in *B* will still be irrational. Her *overall* dealings with the disagreement are flawed, but the flaw happened *before* the retaining of belief *B*. This is similar to the Japan story described above.

Hence, if one has an unreasonable judgment about epistemic superiority, this judgment might make reasonable one’s sticking with one’s belief in the face of disagreement – although one’s overall dealings with disagreement contain important irrationalities. I suspect this is true and a common occurrence: a great many people do indeed have unjustified beliefs in epistemic superiority when it comes to religious beliefs, pro and con. For instance, many atheists are confident that theists just don’t understand much of anything about science or reason, whereas atheists do. Of course, there is *some* truth to this: many adult theists, at least in the USA, are young earth creationists even though they are intelligent enough to know that that position is idiotic. But a great many theists are quite familiar with science and reason, to put it mildly, and atheists rarely have much reason to think all, or even almost all, theists are fools about science or reason (and when they do it’s testimonial and they are living a sheltered life). So, their judgment of superiority is usually unjustified. On the other side, theists often too quickly believe that their experiences of seeing the starry skies or the birth of a baby provide excellent evidence for various theistic claims (e.g., ‘Jesus understands and loves me’): they have little reason to accept such an idea and often have decent evidence that such a belief might be the product of wishful thinking or something similarly epistemically defective.

So judgments of epistemic superiority are often unjustified. Whether they are true is a controversial matter in a great many real-life cases. For instance, reflective theists often claim C_T *that many of them experience God in such a way as to generate justified theistic beliefs and then transmit reasonableness to other theists via testimony*. These alleged perceptions make up a diverse class: a dramatic cognitive ‘lightning bolt’ sent from God (think of the account in Acts of St. Paul’s experiences on the road to Damascus), an enlightenment experience as the result of years of disciplined meditation, the witnessing of something common but extraordinarily moving such as the birth of a baby, or a more general perception that results from reflecting on one’s overall life, allegedly seeing God guiding one in subtle ways that will usually not be convincing to outsiders. On the other hand, atheists often claim C_A *that all theistic belief is grounded in some*

combination of wishful thinking, groupthink, testimony that is poorly grounded, fatally flawed arguments, and other factors excluding perception and impressive scientific or philosophical evidence.

Needless to say, both C_T and C_A are highly controversial. My main point here is that if someone believed either claim, C_T or C_A , then they would fall into category 1; and if they did fall into that category, then it's plausible to think that the answer to the Disagreement Question would be affirmative for them whether or not C_T or C_A was justified for them.

The fact that many people embrace the two claims, C_T and C_A , shows two more things. First, it shows that there are a great many category 1 cases, as was mentioned above. Second, it shows how certain fundamental epistemological questions about religious belief – C_T and C_A for instance – are important when evaluating how reasonable it is to stick with one's religious beliefs in the face of reflective disagreement.

We have seen that it's controversial whether the claims of epistemic superiority regarding religious beliefs are true. It's also controversial whether people often have epistemically justified beliefs in those superiority claims – provided we ignore testimony. However, when we don't ignore testimony, it's less controversial whether people often have justified beliefs in superiority concerning religious claims. As I mentioned earlier, many people have been told, over and over by the people they most look up to, that their group has got it right and the other group is infected with such-and-such epistemic deficiencies that their group largely avoids. For instance, atheists are told by other atheists that many people become theists merely due to brainwashing and wishful thinking, even though the theists may have high IQs and good educations. Theists tell other theists that the reason there are so many atheists is that the atheists have yet to experience God, perhaps through no fault of their own. Whether the testimony is grounded in something epistemically good is an important manner, but it's not hard to see how an ordinary person could be pretty reasonable, via testimony, in falling into category 1 provided they were sheltered.

Category 2: we are epistemic peers

In category 2 we find the people who think their group is roughly *just as likely* to judge B correctly as the disagreeing group. These are cases of peer disagreement. Such cases will be very rare for fundamental beliefs such as 'God exists': as mentioned above theists are going to insist that atheists are missing out on evidence theists have, and by and large atheists are going to think that theists either don't appreciate science as well as they do or theists are unable to rein in their wishful thinking and related epistemic weaknesses when it comes to religion.

The basic situation for category 2 cases is the following. You start out with religious belief B , your first belief. Then you acquire the belief P that so-and-so is your peer when it comes to judging whether B is true or not; that's your second belief. More realistically, P is the belief that the other group is just as likely as your group to have judged B correctly. After that, you come to think that she disagrees with you on B : she thinks it's false whereas you think it's true. (The temporal order varies somewhat from case to case, but our set-up captures a good many real-life cases and can be adjusted to fit others.) That's your third belief, belief D (so D is 'She disagrees with me about B '). You end up with *three* relevant beliefs, B , P , and D , and our main question is whether you can reasonably stick with B (or P or D for that matter). As we will see below, in order to answer the question we will need to pay close attention not only to B , but to P and D as well.

Thus, when you hear someone sincerely say, 'Well, I think B is false, contrary to your view', you have three claims to juggle: B , P , and D . If you started out confident that both B and P are true, but then heard her say that she disagrees with B , you end up faced with a puzzle:

The Peer Puzzle: Given that you think that *B* is true and that she is your peer, so you think *P* is true too, you would expect her to judge *B* the same way you judged it; but it seems that she didn't judge it the same way as you did, as she said '*B* is false'.

That's the puzzling situation of peer disagreement. So what are you supposed to conclude at this point? There are several possibilities one might think about:

- Does she really not disagree with you, so *D* is false?
- Or were you wrong about her being your peer, so *P* is false?
- Or is it the case that she's your peer, *B* is true just like you thought, the two of you really disagree, and she just happened to foul up when judging *B*?
- Or were you wrong that *B* is true?

I think there are cases in which you are reasonable in sticking with your belief *B* even if before the discovery of disagreement you were convinced that the person in question was your peer when it comes to judging *B*.

Vivianna and Mark are twins who as adults are reminiscing about their childhood – in particular, the times that the extended family got together for holidays. Vivianna has always thought that Mark was about as good as her at remembering events from childhood, although of course she doesn't have anything like scientific data as proof. She thinks she and Mark are peers when it comes to most claims of the form 'When we were kids ... '. Then Mark says 'I really miss how Uncle Frank played the piano every Christmas. That was such a great thing'. Vivianna thinks this is nuts. According to her memory, and it is quite vivid (she can recall detailed visual images of the scenes), it wasn't Uncle Frank but Aunt Maria who played the piano, it was always Easter and never Christmas, and Aunt Maria divorced Uncle Frank when she and Mark were only about four years old (so for most of their childhood Frank wasn't even around to play the piano even if he happened to know how to play). So according to Vivianna's vivid memory Mark has got things completely mixed up: wrong relative and wrong holiday.

Most people would say that Vivianna is within her rights – her *epistemic* rights – to stick with her belief *B* 'Uncle Frank did not play the piano every Christmas when we were kids'.

That was a one-on-one disagreement. The same holds for many-on-many cases.

Tessa is an astronomer who reads several scientific blogs about global warming, and so has come to very firmly believe *B*: global warming is happening. If asked, she would say that she's 99% sure of *B*. She accepts *B* because she is well aware of the extreme consensus among climate scientists regarding *B*. She figures that computer scientists are just as likely as any other scientists to correctly judge whether global warming is happening, as they are just as 'plugged in' to the network of scientific testimony. That is, she thinks the groups – astronomers, scientists in general, and computer scientists – are peers when it comes to the question of global warming. Her only basis for this belief is her modest judgment that computer scientists are about as intelligent and informed as other scientists on the issue. Then much to her surprise she learns that 64% of computer scientists think $\sim B$, that global warming is not happening. Tessa concludes that computer scientists aren't as sharp or informed as she thought they were, as she had little specific reason to think so from the start.

I suspect that in the two cases the factor that secures the rationality in sticking with *B* is the fact that the protagonist *has much better overall evidence for B than for P*. In the piano case, although Vivianna had a reasonable amount of evidence that Mark was her peer on the matter of piano playing relatives on holidays, she had much better evidence that Uncle Frank didn't play the piano every Christmas when she and Mark were kids. Analogously, Tessa had much more evidence for the belief that global warming is happening (that's *B*) than for the belief that computer scientists are about as good at judging *B* as astronomers or scientists in general (that's *P*).

So the crucial factor appears to be the *disparity* between one's overall evidence for *B* and one's overall evidence for *P*: when the former vastly outweighs the latter, it's reasonable to stick with one's belief *B* in the face of disagreement. It isn't relevant that she has lots of evidence for *B*. The crucial factor isn't 'She had lots of evidence for *B*' but 'She had *much more* evidence for *B* than for *P*'.

If these verdicts are sound – which is a *colossal* 'if', considering how new the topic of disagreement is – then it follows that, if a person had much greater overall evidence for a religious belief *B* than a peer belief *P*, then she would be evidentially reasonable in sticking with *B* after the discovery of disagreement.

However, even if the disparity of evidence isn't present, there still might be a kind of rationality in sticking with *B*.

Jo is an economist who is very confident that nuclear power is more promising than solar power when it comes to weaning the world off fossil fuels. She has this extreme confidence despite the fact that she has little evidence for it (e.g., she has read a few opinion pieces in the *New York Times* and *The Economist*, each of which presented little evidence for the idea even though they were rhetorically impressive). She thinks scientists should be able to judge the question of which power source is better as well as she and her fellow economists can – although the *only* reason she has this peerhood belief is that she respects the intelligence of scientists and knows that they know about both technologies. But then she learns that most scientists think solar is more promising than nuclear. She concludes that the scientists just don't understand the economics of the situation, even though they understand the science and technology of it.

Given that she has such extreme confidence in *B* and a relatively low confidence in *P*, it 'makes sense' that she would stick with *B* upon discovery of disagreement. This might not be the direction her overall evidence points in, but *given that she started with too much confidence in B compared to P*, the epistemically reasonable thing for her to do is stick with *B*. This case is similar to the Japan one from above. It isn't hard to imagine how it would apply in religious cases.

None of the above arguments or theses should be taken as even close to established, as the topic of the epistemology of disagreement is extremely young compared to other philosophical topics and consequently in a large state of flux. (For what it's worth, every time I write an article on disagreement I end up defending theses very different from ones I've defended in the past.) The next few years should witness some real progress on the topic.

14

RELIGION AND SUPERSTITION

Edward Feser

Superstition is to religion as rashness is to courage or as buffoonery is to wittiness. It is a vice corresponding to a virtue, a corruption of religion rather than the real thing. Aquinas maintains that it is a vice of excess, though not because of the *amount* of devotion involved but rather because of its *manner* or its *object* (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.92.1). He also distinguishes four species of superstition: improper worship of the true God; idolatry; divination or consulting with demons; and vain observances, such as the use of amulets or other purportedly magical practices (*Summa Theologiae* II-II.92.2). (See Wilhelm 1912 and McHugh and Callan 1958 for some useful elaborations of this traditional classification.)

Contemporary atheist readers – and perhaps some religious readers too – are likely to think that Aquinas’s distinction between religion and superstition dissolves if there is no God. For if Aquinas’s God does not exist in the first place, are not all forms of worship of Him equally improper? Wouldn’t the worship of Aquinas’s God be as inappropriate as the worship of the non-existent objects of idolatry? Wouldn’t the religious practices Aquinas approves of be as vain as divination and magic?

But in fact a principled distinction can be made between religion and superstition whether or not one thinks Aquinas’s God or any other god exists. The distinction should therefore be of philosophical interest to atheists no less than to theists. Aquinas’s classification will serve as a useful template for the discussion to follow, though it will be best to treat the species of superstition in an order different from his. We will look first at idolatry, and see why the God of classical theism would, if He exists, be an appropriate object of worship in a way other gods would not be, even if they existed. Next we will examine magic, and it will be argued that what is objectionable about at least much that goes by that name is not merely that it does not work, but that it is the sort of thing that could not work even in principle. Third, we will consider divination and see that the main problem with it is not that it does not work, but that even if it does work, it is an improper means of achieving the ends for which it is deployed. Fourth, we will consider how certain forms of worship even of the God of classical theism are improper. Finally, we will consider some illegitimate extensions of the concept of ‘superstition’.

Idolatry

Some might suppose that the main objection to idolatry is that the gods to which it is directed – pagan deities of the sort that occupy the Greek and Roman pantheons, for example – do not

exist. That that is not the whole story should be obvious enough from the fact that the worship of Roman emperors, animals, or the sun is also commonly condemned as idolatrous despite the fact that these things do exist. Of course, these things do not really have the powers sometimes attributed to them, but that cannot be the only reason why worshipping them is condemned as idolatrous. Money is real and really can give one great power, but excessive concern with it is often condemned as idolatrous. It is evident, then, that to condemn something as idolatry is to claim that its object is in some way inappropriate *whether or not* it exists. When a writer like Aquinas approves of worship of the 'true' God, then, he surely does not mean to refer merely to the God who happens to exist. He evidently means as well that the God of which he speaks is in some way an *appropriate* object of worship in a way other possible objects of worship are not, for reasons having to do with more than just questions of existence or non-existence.

To understand these reasons we need to understand *classical theism*, the conception of God that has prevailed historically within Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Western philosophical theism generally. Its religious roots are biblical, and its philosophical roots are to be found in the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian traditions. Among philosophers it is represented by the likes of Augustine, Anselm, Aquinas, Maimonides, and Avicenna. (See Davies (2004: Chapter 1) for a useful overview.)

How God is conceived of within classical theism is perhaps best understood via the arguments traditionally given by classical theists for His existence. For the Aristotelian tradition, the things of our experience undergo change because they are composites of potentiality and actuality, for change is the actualization of a potentiality. But the ultimate explanation of how any potential is actualized can only lie in an 'unactualized actualizer' or Unmoved Mover, who is not actualized by anything else precisely because He is *pure actuality* and thus devoid of any potentiality in need of actualizing. For the Neoplatonic tradition, anything that is in any way composite must have a cause in something which combines its parts (whether these are physical or metaphysical parts). But then the ultimate cause of things must be something which has no parts of any sort to be combined, but is absolutely *One* or non-composite. For the Thomistic tradition, anything whose essence or nature (*what* it is) is distinct from its existence (*that* it is) must have a cause which conjoins its essence to an 'act of existing'. But then the ultimate cause of things must be something whose essence and existence are one and thus not in need of being conjoined, something which just is *Subsistent Being Itself*. For Anselm, God is not merely the greatest reality there *happens* to be, but the *greatest conceivable* reality. That is the core of his famous ontological argument, to the effect that a non-existent God would be less than the greatest conceivable being.

This is merely to summarize rather than to state or defend such arguments. (I have defended some of them at length in Feser 2009, 2011.) The point for present purposes is to emphasize the *ultimacy in principle* of God as conceived within classical theism. The God of classical theism is not *a* cause alongside other causes; rather, as pure actuality itself, that which imparts the capacity to actualize to all created causes, He is the precondition of there being any causal power at all. He is not '*a* being' alongside other beings, nor does He merely *have* being; rather, He just *is* Subsistent Being Itself. Since He is absolutely one, simple, or non-composite, He is not composed even of genus and difference; and thus He is not *an* instance of a kind, not even a unique instance. This is the deep reason why, for the classical theist, there cannot even in principle be more than one God. Distinction between two or more instances of a kind requires that there be some potentiality one instance has actualized and the others have not, some essence that they share distinct from their acts of existence, some composition of genus and difference. None of that applies to that which is pure actuality, Subsistent Being Itself, and absolutely one or non-composite.

It is for this reason a deep mistake to suppose, as some contemporary atheists do, that to reject the God of classical theism is merely to cross one further name off of a list of gods the rest of whom everyone else also already rejects – Zeus, Mercury, Thor, Quetzalcoatl, et al. (See e.g. McGinn 2012 and my response in Feser 2012.) That is to suppose that the God of classical theism is an instance of a kind or a member of a class, ‘a being’ or ‘a cause’ more or less like other beings and causes except for having a higher degree of power, intelligence, or moral virtue. And that is precisely what He is not, according to classical theism. God is no more one instance among others of the kind ‘gods’ than Plato’s Form of the Good is one instance among others (good books, good food, etc.) of the kind ‘good things’ or than the property *being a triangle* is one instance among others (dinner bells, traffic signs, etc.) of the kind ‘triangles’. (That is not to say that God is a Form or a property, but only to indicate that to think of Him as an instance of a kind is to commit a category mistake.)

None of this presupposes that the God of classical theism actually exists; that is a separate question. It should be clear, however, why affirming His existence is not essential to making a principled distinction between the worship of the God of classical theism on the one hand, and the worship of anything else on the other. Zeus, Mercury, Thor, Quetzalcoatl, et al. are essentially *creaturely*. They are finite and contingent in the way anything must be that is composite, or a mixture of actuality and potentiality, or comprised of an essence and a separate act of existing. They differ from human beings in longevity and in the degree of their power and knowledge, but only in the way the extraterrestrials and superheroes of science fiction and comic books do. (Indeed, some of these gods have in fact been turned into contemporary comic book characters.) That is why these gods are philosophically uninteresting in a way the God of classical theism is not, or should not be, even for the atheist.

God, by contrast, radically transcends the categories that apply to stones, plants, animals, human beings, and the pagan gods alike. For some classical theists, such as Aquinas, we cannot apply language to God and to created things in a *univocal* way, but only *analogically*. Hence when we say that God has power or knowledge, we are not saying that He has the same sort of thing we have, only more of it (as we *could* say of Zeus or Thor). Rather, we are saying that there is in God something *analogous* to what we call power and knowledge in us, though it cannot be the same thing since our power and knowledge involve the actualization of potentials whereas God is pure actuality, etc. For other classical theists, such as Maimonides, we cannot make positive claims about God at all, but must confine ourselves to negative theology. We can say only what God is not: He is not material, He is without beginning, and so forth.

The God of classical theism is *creator*, then, not in the sense in which created things themselves are ‘creators’ or makers of things. He does not use pre-existing materials, but creates *ex nihilo*. He does not merely *generate* things but *sustains* them in being, at every moment keeping them from lapsing into nothingness. He is the source of the existence of things in the ultimate sense of being that to which all possible causality and existence trace, a First Cause which does not merely *happen* not to have a cause of its own, but which could not intelligibly be said to require one.

If anything is worthy of worship, then, God is worthy of worship in a way nothing else could be even in principle. Hence, for the classical theist, if it turned out that God did not exist but Mercury or Thor did, that would not entail that we should turn our devotion to the latter instead. Rather, it would mean that there just *isn’t* anything that is worthy of the sort of absolute devotion that God alone could merit. Anything less than God, being *essentially* creaturely, is *necessarily* unworthy of that sort of devotion. Anselm, after all, would presumably not say that if the greatest conceivable being turned out not to exist, we might consider worshipping the second, fifth, or fifty-seventh greatest being instead. (That is not to say that other beings might

not be owed a lesser degree of honour. The supreme worship owed God, or *latría*, is traditionally distinguished from the lesser sort of reverence or *dulia* owed to angels and saints, or the honour we ought to show to parents and other earthly authorities.)

The notion of idolatry, then, as the giving of the absolute devotion properly directed at God alone to something less than God, to something essentially creaturely, is intelligible apart from the question of whether God exists. Even if God did not exist and the gods of the pagan pantheons did, there is a clear sense in which the worship of the latter would still count as idolatrous.

Of course, there are a great many religious people who ostensibly worship the same God as Anselm, Aquinas, Maimonides, Avicenna, et al. but who are unfamiliar with the philosophical concepts and arguments referred to above, and who would not understand them even if they were made acquainted with them. They may even conceive of God in ways incompatible with what has been said. (For example, they may think of Him as an old man with a long white beard.) Are they guilty of idolatry? That does not follow. Lack of theological sophistication is not the same thing as the intentional worship of something other than the true God.

For that reason, though, the classical theist should exercise caution before judging those outside the classical theist tradition as culpably idolatrous. As *The Catholic Encyclopedia* says:

The guilt of idolatry, however, is not to be estimated by its abstract nature alone; the concrete form it assumes in the conscience of the sinner is the all-important element. No sin is mortal—i.e. debarb man from attaining the end for which he was created—that is not committed with clear knowledge and free determination. But how many, or how few, of the countless millions of idolaters are, or have been, able to distinguish between the one Creator of all things and His creatures? and, having made the distinction, how many have been perverse enough to worship the creature in preference to the Creator?—It is reasonable, Christian, and charitable to suppose that the ‘false gods’ of the heathen were, in their conscience, the only true God they knew, and that their worship being right in its intention, went up to the one true God with that of Jews and Christians to whom He had revealed Himself.

(Wilhelm 1910: 636)

By the same token, contemporary classical theists critical of the alternative, non-classical conceptions of God defended by some philosophers of religion are not necessarily accusing the latter of idolatry, as opposed to mere philosophical or theological error. (Cf. Brian Davies’ (2004) contrast of classical theism with the more anthropomorphic ‘theistic personalism’ he finds in writers like Alvin Plantinga, Richard Swinburne, and Charles Hartshorne.)

Magic

Some atheists might suppose that the religious practices a thinker like Aquinas would approve of do not differ essentially from the magical practices of which he would disapprove. To approve of prayer and sacraments but to disapprove of amulets, incantations, and the like would (so the atheist might claim) merely be to suppose that supernatural or preternatural forces of the sort presupposed by the former actually exist, while those presupposed by the latter do not. But the two sorts of practices are (again, so the argument might go) essentially of the same sort, both essentially ‘magical’.

But that is not the case. To be sure, those who object to so-called ‘magic’ do typically hold that the powers it purportedly involves are bogus. And theists like Aquinas would indeed claim that there are supernatural and preternatural powers. (For example, such theists would typically

hold that God sometimes causes miracles, and that angels of both the righteous and the fallen sort sometimes cause unusual events to occur.) But it does not follow that all such unusual powers are to be assimilated to magic. God, angels, and disembodied souls are taken by thinkers like Aquinas to be at least partially intelligible to us via metaphysical analysis, and fully intelligible in themselves. Magic, by contrast, at least sometimes seems to be regarded as something inherently unintelligible, something inconsistent with the supposition that everything in the world possesses an order that might at least in principle be rationally ascertainable.

In his book *Renewing Philosophy*, Hilary Putnam makes some interesting remarks on the subject:

If a witch must have magical powers, then it is far from clear that the concept of a witch is a coherent one, because it is far from clear that the concept of a magical power is a coherent one. We can certainly imagine possible worlds in which things regularly happen that superstitious people would regard as magic; but the very fact that they regularly happen in those possible worlds is strong reason for saying that in those possible worlds those things are not really magic – it is just that those worlds have different laws than the actual world. The notion of a world in which things happen that are ‘truly magical’ is, I think, an incoherent one; and that means, I think, that the notion of a witch is an incoherent one. One might try to meet this difficulty by defining a witch not as someone who has magical powers but as someone who has supernatural powers, where the supernatural is understood not in terms of the notion of magic, but in terms of not falling within the categories of substance, space, and time. It is extremely doubtful that the pagan witches, or the witches of present-day African tribes, are supposed to derive their powers from something which is supernatural in that sense. It is a feature, in fact, of pagan thought that the gods, demons, and so on, are not supernatural in the sense which came into existence with the rise of Greek philosophy and the incorporation into the Jerusalem-based religions of a certain amount of Greek philosophy. The notion that what is magical must derive from the supernatural, in the philosophical/theological sense of ‘supernatural’, is not part of the original meaning of the term.

(Putnam 1992: 44)

Putnam surely captures one important sense of the term ‘magical’, and in particular the sense of ‘magical’ in which the notion of magic must be regarded as objectionable by anyone of a broadly rationalistic or scientific mindset. ‘Magical’ powers, as Putnam here describes them, are powers which are *intrinsically unintelligible*. It’s not just that we happen not to know how they operate, or even that we are somehow too cognitively limited ever to find out how they operate; it’s that there is, objectively, no rhyme or reason whatsoever to how they operate. They are incomprehensible *in principle* and not merely in practice.

Appeals to magic in this sense can, of necessity, explain nothing. They are rightly dismissed as pseudo-explanations or worse – Putnam suggests that they are actually *incoherent*. (He does not elaborate, but perhaps his point is that it is incoherent to suppose that an appeal to ‘magic’ is any kind of explanation given (a) that an explanation necessarily makes the *explanandum* intelligible, and (b) that the notion of magic is the notion of that which is inherently unintelligible.)

The classical theist, however, is clearly not appealing to ‘magic’ in this sense, either when he appeals to God as the explanation of why anything exists, or when he appeals either to God, or to angels or disembodied souls, as an explanation of some particular miraculous or otherwise unusual phenomenon. On the contrary, the traditional arguments for the existence of the God

of classical theism entail that reality is ultimately *intelligible through and through*. There are no 'brute facts' for a thinker like Aquinas. Again, that God does not have a cause is not because He is an arbitrary exception to the explanatory demands we make on other things. Rather, other things demand a cause because they go from potential to actual, are in various ways composite, and comprise an essence together with a distinct act of existing. God requires no cause because He is none of these things; He is instead pure actuality and absolutely simple or non-composite, and His essence just is existence. He is *intrinsically intelligible* in a way nothing else is or could be.

So, there is a kind of *irrationalism* to the notion of magic that is foreign to the classical theist tradition, deeply influenced as it has been by Greek philosophy. Indeed, ironic as it may seem, there is a sense in which *atheism*, if not carefully formulated, might be more justly accused of tending toward a belief in 'magic' than classical theism is. The atheist J.L. Mackie writes:

The sort of intelligibility that is achieved by successful causal inquiry and scientific explanation is not undermined by its inability to make things intelligible through and through. Any particular explanation starts with premises which state 'brute facts', and although the brutally factual starting-points of one explanation may themselves be further explained by another, the latter in turn will have to start with something that it does not explain, *and so on however far we go* ...

[I]t may be intellectually satisfying to believe that there is, objectively, an explanation for everything together, even if we can only guess at what the explanation might be. But we have no right to assume that the universe will comply with our intellectual preferences.

(Mackie 1982: 85–87, *emphasis in the original*)

The classical theist, as we have seen, disagrees with the claim that all explanations will have to proceed from 'brutally factual starting-points ... *however far we go*'; God is not a brute fact, but something fully intelligible in Himself (even if not to us) and whose intelligibility is, again, intrinsic rather than derived. Reality is, for that reason, 'intelligible through and through'. By contrast, Mackie seems committed to the view that while some of the laws uncovered by science can be explained by reference to the operation of deeper laws, the operation of the *fundamental* laws constitutes an inherently unintelligible brute fact. Yet to operate in a way that is ultimately unintelligible in principle *just is* to be 'magical' in the objectionable sense identified by Putnam. And an appeal to what operates in this unintelligible way is no more a true explanation than an appeal to magic counts as a true explanation. A non-magical atheism, then, would arguably have to be one which affirms that reality is intelligible through and through without thereby committing itself to God as the ultimate explanation of things.

Classical theists like Aquinas do, as I have said, affirm the existence of unusual powers that are not 'magical' in the irrationalist sense just described, but which may be described as 'magical' in the looser sense of being intelligible in themselves, but beyond the abilities and/or understanding of human beings. Demonic interventions in the ordinary course of things would be an example. Magic in this sense is objectionable not because the sources of such magical powers do not exist, but because they do exist (at least in the view of many religions, and in the view of many classical theists in particular), yet are inappropriate means by which to generate the effects sought by those who make use of them (cf. Arendzen 1911). This brings us to divination.

Divination

Whereas magic in this latter sense involves appeal to demonic forces for the sake of achieving certain practical results, divination is the appeal to demons, astrology, the spirits of the dead, or

the like for the purpose of attaining knowledge of future events or matters otherwise hidden to us. If superstition in general is a corruption of religion and magic is a corrupt analogue of practices like prayer and the sacraments, divination might be thought of as a corrupt analogue of the practice of consulting divine revelation. Once again to quote *The Catholic Encyclopedia*: 'As prophecy is the lawful knowledge of the future divination, its superstitious counterpart, is the unlawful. As magic aims to do, divination aims to know' (Graham 1909).

Naturally, the atheist will reject the practice of consulting evil spirits on the grounds that such spirits do not (he maintains) exist in the first place, but it is not hard to see why the practice would be objectionable even given the supposition that they do exist. For if a demon, *qua* fallen angel, wishes ill upon the human beings who consult it, the demon will hardly be a reliable source of information about future and hidden matters, even if it has such information.

Similarly, while the atheist is bound to reject practices like astrology, spiritualism, etc., on the grounds that their ontological presuppositions are bogus, these practices too would be objectionable even on the assumption that there is something to them. For even those who think such practices have some value would have to acknowledge that they are at best erratic in their results. They have nothing remotely like the kind of reliability possessed by everyday inductive reasoning, inference from known natural laws, etc. Hence, even if, in the rare cases where they seem to provide accurate information, this information were supposed to have a source beyond the normal course of things, there is nothing in the nature of the practices themselves that could guarantee that this source was not in fact some evil spirit (again, assuming the existence of such) acting with nefarious intent.

Furthermore, for the classical theist, strict knowledge of the future is the prerogative of God alone. The regularities in the natural order He has established, together with any special revelation He has made available (as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all claim he has), tell us everything about the future or about otherwise hidden matters that we would need to know. Thus, to seek such knowledge in spiritual sources other than God is (so a traditional line of argument goes) impiously to try to usurp what can only belong to God, and shows a lack of trust in divine providence.

Improper worship

Unlike idolatry, magic, and divination, improper worship is directed at a worthy *object*, but it is nevertheless defective in its *manner*. Obviously, a form of worship of the true God would be improper if it involved grave immorality (e.g., human sacrifice). But it might also be defective in less dramatic ways. For instance, it might be morally defective in that it introduces deceptive or unnecessary elements, as when a fraudster spreads false miracle stories (perhaps for what he takes to be pious motives) or a fanatic exaggerates the significance of some favoured devotion or the plausibility of some purported revelation, apparition, or the like. Or it might be epistemically defective in that it involves a credulous tendency to find religious significance in objects and events that have none, or in some particular manner of carrying out religious activities. Examples would be thinking that one can see the image of Christ or the Virgin Mary in a piece of burnt toast, or supposing that carrying a certain religious medal in one's pocket or saying a certain prayer a certain number of times a day will guarantee safety or good health. But while such practices are superstitious and therefore instances of a vice, the moral defect involved is probably often minor and the culpability low, to the extent that the practices rest on ignorance or simple-mindedness rather than malice.

While such practices differ from magic and divination in that their objects are directed at what classical theists would regard as the true God, they are sometimes similar to magic and

divination insofar as their aim is to know or influence the course of events. This may be the sort of thing Wittgenstein had in mind when he wrote:

Religious faith and superstition are quite different. One of them results from fear and is a sort of false science. The other is a trusting.

(Wittgenstein 1980: 72)

As with magic and divination, the believer who supposes that a certain manner of worshipping the true God will guarantee good health or prosperity (say) is practising a kind of 'false science', his inordinate concern with mundane matters leading him to see patterns or causes where there are none. The truly religious attitude, of which this sort of superstition is a corruption, is one of trusting in divine providence and the knowledge of things that it has made possible through study of the natural order and (so Judaism, Christianity, and Islam claim) via special revelation.

What superstition isn't

Lack of sophistication often underlies these improper forms of worship. But there are additional consequences of lack of sophistication. We noted above that unsophisticated religious believers are typically unfamiliar with the ideas and arguments deployed by religious philosophers, and would not understand them even if they were made acquainted with them. The justifications they would offer for their beliefs and practices are, accordingly, not the sort of thing that would impress the educated sceptic. Does that entail that *all* of the religious beliefs and practices of such unsophisticated people, and not merely those that fall under the 'improper worship' category, count as a kind of superstition or are otherwise irrational? Is it only the professional philosopher or theologian who counts as a non-superstitious religious believer?

That does not follow. After all, the man on the street who has some very general knowledge of scientific ideas like quantum mechanics or natural selection might have a difficult time justifying his belief in such ideas, or even explaining them very clearly. But no one thinks him irrational or superstitious for that reason. It is allowed that he is reasonable in believing these theories on the basis of the authority of scientists who have established them and could explain and justify them to sceptics if the need arose. (The reader will recall that an appeal to authority is *fallacious* only when the authority in question does not have expertise on the specific subject at hand, or where there is special reason to doubt his objectivity.) There is no reason to rule out of hand the suggestion that the unsophisticated religious believer can be justified in his beliefs as long as there are more sophisticated believers (such as professional philosophers and theologians) who could give the requisite arguments. There can plausibly be a 'division of intellectual labour' in religion no less than in science.

More controversially, it is arguable that certain beliefs and practices are reasonable even if intellectually inclined believers do not have airtight rational justifications ready to hand. F.A. Hayek writes:

The rationalistic attitude to ... problems [of morality] is best seen in its views on what it calls 'superstition'. I do not wish to underestimate the merit of the persistent and relentless fight of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against beliefs which are demonstrably false. But we must remember that the extension of the concept of superstition to all beliefs which are not demonstrably true lacks the same justification and may often be harmful. That we ought not to believe anything which has been shown to be false does not mean that we ought to believe only what has been

demonstrated to be true. There are good reasons why any person who wants to live and act successfully in society must accept many common beliefs, though the value of these reasons may have little to do with their demonstrable truth. Such beliefs will also be based on some past experience but not on experience for which anyone can produce the evidence ... We would destroy the foundations of much successful action if we disdained to rely on ways of doing things evolved by the process of trial and error simply because the reason for their adoption has not been handed down to us. The appropriateness of our conduct is not necessarily dependent on our knowing why it is so ... While this applies to all our values, it is most important in the case of moral rules of conduct. Next to language, they are perhaps the most important instance of an undesigned growth, of a set of rules which govern our lives but of which we can say neither why they are what they are nor what they do to us: we do not know what the consequences of observing them are for us as individuals and as a group. And it is against the demand for submission to such rules that the rationalistic spirit is in constant revolt.

(Hayek 1960: 64–65)

Here Hayek, though not a conservative, was deploying a broadly conservative line of argument in defence of tradition that goes back at least to Edmund Burke. The basic idea is that given the complexity of human life, the large-scale consequences of either following or rejecting certain rules and practices is not always evident even to the most intelligent inquirer. Certain rules and practices may have benefits that we cannot see; and if it happens that they have already persisted for a long period of time, that gives us at least some reason to think that they do in fact have such benefits. For having survived the trial and error process of cultural evolution, they have a claim to fitness. We ought therefore to presume them innocent until proven guilty, to be cautious before abandoning or modifying them, and to minimize our alterations when we do modify them. (See Feser 2003 for a detailed exposition and defence of this sort of argument.)

Of course, if successful, this sort of argument still provides at least an *indirect* rational justification of the traditional rules and practices in question. It is really only a certain *kind* of rational justification that the Burkean-Hayekian conservative plausibly thinks these practices need not have; he is not claiming (or at least need not claim) that they should have *no* rational justification whatsoever. What he is arguing, then, is that it is a mistake to dismiss something as ‘superstition’ merely because it does not meet a certain *specific criterion* of rational justification, namely a direct demonstration of its truth or utility. For it may still meet more nuanced criteria of rationality; in particular, we may have good *indirect* reason to think that it is true or useful even if we can neither directly show that it is true nor identify the specific ways in which it is useful.

Given these considerations together with the points made above about classical theism and ‘magical’ explanations, the atheist or sceptic is well advised to exercise caution before too quickly assimilating religion to superstition. It is also far from clear that religious people are uniquely prone to what is objectionable in superstition in the first place. Sensationalistic claims about extraterrestrials, conspiracies, cryptozoology, the curative powers of various substances, paranormal phenomena, etc. are often put forward, and accepted, on the basis of what is alleged to be ‘scientific evidence’. (Cf. Disch 1998 for an entertaining account of some of the oddities modern people have associated with science, or at least science fiction.) Nor, popular caricatures aside, have more religious eras of history necessarily been more superstitious than our secular age. As Peter Dendle, writing on medieval superstition, sums things up:

There are often deep-seated psychological motives for beliefs that are, on the face of things, irrational: for instance, the perpetuation and enactment of ritual lore can give

people a psychological sense of comfort and group identity and link them with their heritage, and can relieve anxiety by providing a sense of control over circumstances that are in fact beyond all control. This facet of human behaviour does not show any signs of having arisen in any one historical time or place, nor does it show signs of abating or being eventually supplanted by reason or science. There is little sense in singling out the Middle Ages, then, as a time of especially pronounced or absurd superstition.

(Dendle 2008: 121)

Part IV

Metaphysics and religious language

REALISM AND ANTI-REALISM

Michael Scott

‘Realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ (or sometimes ‘non-realism’) are philosophical terms of art that have been used in a variety of ways to refer to opposing positions in numerous subjects of philosophical interest, including scientific theories, mathematics, ethics, aesthetics, time, the external world, and religion. The points of dispute between realists and anti-realists often differ according to the subject matter in question. For example, in the philosophy of science, the realism/anti-realism debate is often concerned with whether scientific theories give us true or approximately true descriptions of the observable and unobservable world; in the philosophy of mathematics it is often focused on the nature and existence of mathematical entities; in ethics, a central issue is whether ethical utterances express ethical beliefs or instead other non-cognitive attitudes of approval or disapproval. Even within the context of a particular philosophical field, the realism/anti-realism debate may cover a range of metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic matters: Do the posited entities exist? Do they exist independently of our mental states and our linguistic or social practices? Are we able to acquire knowledge of them? Do sentences apparently about those entities represent them? Do our utterances about them express beliefs?

There has been extensive debate, particularly during the 1990s, on whether a particular construal of realism should merit pole position, with some arguing that metaphysical issues are central (Devitt 1991) and others taking the philosophy of language as primary (Dummett 1993). There have also been attempts to provide an overarching framework that encompasses all of the main issues that arise in debates between realists and anti-realists (Wright 1992). However, while this work has done much to make clearer the points of disagreement between realists and anti-realists and the optimal way of formulating them, it has brought little unity into the characterization of different realism/anti-realism debates. The usage of ‘realism’ and ‘anti-realism’ has become sufficiently fragmented that it is not unusual (in fact, it is something of a requirement for philosophical clarity) for authors addressing the realism debate to introduce definitions of them. This is as true in the philosophy of religion as in other fields (Alston 1995), where a range of realism-relevant issues are in play: Do any religious facts obtain? Are religious facts (whether or not they obtain) independent of our mental states or linguistic and social practices? Do religious sentences represent religious facts, and are they made true by the world being as they represent it to be? Do religious utterances express non-cognitive attitudes as well as or instead of beliefs?

Since our current interest in the realism debate as it has developed within the philosophy of religion is principally focused on religious language, we can usefully narrow our focus somewhat

by considering questions about the correct interpretation of religious discourse. We can give a preliminary characterisation of religious realism as the theory that religious sentences and utterances address a real subject matter, with anti-realism opposing this view (in a variety of ways). By a religious sentence, I mean a sentence (unless otherwise indicated, an indicative sentence) that posits a religious entity such as God, or a religious property such as holiness.¹ I take a religious utterance to be the production of a token religious sentence in speech, writing, or otherwise; utterances are not tied to verbal communication. The distinction between sentences and utterances and more generally between language and discourse is, as we will see, quite crucial to the realism/anti-realism debate. Some forms of anti-realism are theories about the language that is used in religious discourse, while others target the use to which religious language is put.

The first section will give an overview of three key points of difference that have characterised realism/anti-realism disputes about religious language. The following three sections will look at these differences in more detail.

Overview

If realists generally take religious discourse to address a real subject matter what, more specifically, does this involve? A useful way of characterizing the realist account is to say that it maintains that a ‘face-value approach’ provides a complete interpretation of religious sentences and utterances. There are three areas of interpretation that have been the focus of dispute: (a) The type of content that a given religious sentence possesses; (b) the truth conditions of religious sentences; and (c) the meaning of religious utterances. Taking these in turn, a face-value approach takes religious sentences to have representational content, and that content represents religious facts or properties. For example, the religious sentence

- (1) God is omnipotent

should be interpreted as saying, or as having the ‘propositional’ or ‘semantic’ content, *that God is omnipotent*. The face-value reading of (1) is that it truth-conditionally depends on whether God is omnipotent. Finally, the face-value approach takes the *utterance* of (1) typically to be an assertion that expresses the belief of the speaker that God is omnipotent. More generally, in stating a religious sentence, a speaker is usually committed to the truth of what is being said.

If these points sound plausible or even obvious that is precisely what the realist hopes for: the face-value approach aims to be the most straightforward way of interpreting the meaning of religious utterances and sentences. It is, moreover, a key point exploited by religious realists that their position provides the simplest and most intuitive reading of religious discourse consistent with linguistic evidence. Realists see the onus of argument to be on the anti-realist to explain why we should diverge from the face-value approach. However, there is a long-standing and still enduring tradition of anti-realist opposition to face-value readings that takes issue with their approach to (a), (b), or (c). Anti-realists find the face-value approach either incomplete or entirely wrong on at least one of these three issues; at their most sophisticated, anti-realists also provide explanations of why religious language has the surface appearance of representing religious facts, etc., even though it does not actually have this function.

We will consider the anti-realist opposition to each of these three aspects of the face-value interpretation in the following three sections. However, before embarking on this review we should distinguish *revisionary* from *non-revisionary* theories of religious language. Non-revisionary theories attempt to give the correct interpretation of religious sentences and utterances; they are

descriptive theories of the meaning of such sentences and utterances that (if successful) explain the available linguistic evidence. In contrast, revisionary theories tell us what speakers *ought* to mean when they use religious language. The face-value approach aims to be non-revisionary. But consider, for instance, followers of the Sea of Faith movement inspired by Don Cupitt's work in the 1980s. They support the pursuit of the kinds of practices typically engaged in by religious believers – prayer, church going, attempting to meet various moral standards, etc. – as well as engagement with religious discourse, but *without* religious belief.² Detractors judge this to be little more than atheism misleadingly presented as religious conviction (see Plantinga 2000). Proponents argue that one can legitimately gain access to the benefits of a religious life without being committed to superstitious beliefs (Cupitt 1984). Some practising members of the Anglican Communion number among the movement's supporters. A participant in the Sea of Faith movement may appear to reject the realist view of (c), namely that religious utterances conventionally express the speaker's religious beliefs. But someone sympathetic to the Sea of Faith movement is encouraging a *revision* to religious attitudes. Rather than expressing religious beliefs, religious communities should instead engage in religious practice and discourse but without commitments to 'myths' and supernatural entities. As such, we should expect an endorsement of the face-value approach to religious discourse.

Determining whether an author is putting forward a revisionary or non-revisionary theory can sometimes be difficult. But the distinction is a critical one. The merits of a revisionary theory will rest in part on the plausibility of the metaphysical considerations that motivate them (in the case of the Sea of Faith movement, that beliefs in supernatural beings are false, but engaging in religious practice is a good thing). In contrast, the merits of a non-revisionary theory will be largely assessed by linguistic evidence about the meaning of religious utterances. Our concern in this chapter is with non-revisionary theories.

Religious language

As described above, a face-value reading of a religious sentence such as (1) takes it to have the content *that God is omnipotent*. More generally, a religious sentence posits some religious fact or property. Accordingly, the face-value approach takes it that, in stating (1), a speaker standardly expresses the belief in that content. The sentence can, of course, be used differently to express attitudes other than belief or to express beliefs other than that God is omnipotent. For instance, it could be used by a speaker to express awe in addition to the belief that God is omnipotent, or used ironically to communicate the belief that God is *not* omnipotent. However, the face-value approach takes belief expression to be the conventional use of religious sentences. In this respect, the face-value interpretation of religious language does not diverge from our interpretation of other descriptive areas of language: the (indicative) sentences of the language report facts and are conventionally used to express beliefs. For many realists, this provides a complete account of religious language. There is, in general, nothing special about the content of religious sentences other than its distinctive subject matter.

Despite the plausibility and simplicity of the face-value account of content, there is a long-standing and still enduring tradition of opposition from within both the philosophy of religion and theology. I will use *attitude theory* as a general term for this opposition. Attitude theory usually has positive and negative components. On the negative side, the face-value interpretation of religious sentences as having a purely representational content and as religious utterances conventionally expressing just beliefs is rejected. On the positive side, attitude theorists usually emphasise the 'non-cognitive' meaning of religious utterances in expressing mental states other than belief such as stances, intentions, awe, devotion, plans, approval, and disapproval.

Contemporary discussion of attitude theory has not always done the position justice. The theory is often presented in its most radical (and, frankly, very implausible) form that religious sentences do not represent the world and that religious utterances do not express beliefs *at all*. Moreover, attitude theory is seen as a historically recent development motivated by non-religious, or even anti-religious, considerations that emerged primarily out of the now discredited verificationist theory of meaning developed by logical positivists in the 1920s and later popularized by A.J. Ayer (1946). Logical positivists argued that if the truth of a sentence could not be empirically verified, it should be deemed factually contentless or even meaningless. Religious sentences, along with metaphysical, ethical, and aesthetic sentences, were all seen as empirically unverifiable and thereby lacking in descriptive content.

Here are some representative comments. According to Richard Swinburne (1977/1993: 88),

Some twentieth-century writers from R.B. Braithwaite to Wittgenstein and D.Z. Phillips have denied that theological 'assertions' ever make statements, claims about how things are. As an account of the actual use of such assertions by religious believers of the past two millennia, this is plainly false. The sentences of creeds do make statements.

J.L. Mackie (1982: 2), discussing attitude theory, says:

The main reason why it has been thought that religious language cannot be literally meaningful is that some philosophers—particularly the logical positivists—have embraced a strongly verificationist theory of meaning ... But this theory of meaning is itself highly implausible.

Similar historical assessments are offered by Alston (2005), Wynn (1995), and others. Peter van Inwagen contends that disagreement with a face-value account of content is really an atheistic position masquerading as a religious one:

Not so long ago, as time is measured in the history of thought, anyone who said that it was a mistake to regard *x* as *F* would have meant, and have been taken by everyone to mean, that *x* was *not F*. ... Not so long ago, everyone who said that nothing had the properties on the list 'aseity, holiness, omnipotence, omniscience, providence, love, self-revelation' would have proudly described himself as an atheist.

(2006: 156)

Plantinga (2000) offers a similar diagnosis.

Let's begin with the points about the history and motivations of attitude theories. While R.B. Braithwaite (1970) is a leading attitude theorist influenced by logical positivism, opposition to the face-value account of content stretches back far before the twentieth century. For example, George Berkeley developed an attitude theory for central claims of Christian doctrine in his *Alciphron* (1732): he argued that claims about the Trinity, original sin, and grace do not express beliefs about these Christian mysteries, but instead evoke and express attitudes conducive to Christian faith.³ Even earlier, apophatic and mystical theologians – notable examples being Denys the Areopagite (late fifth to sixth centuries), Evagrius Ponticus (fourth century), and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* (later fourteenth century) – saw the purpose of engaging in religious discourse to be achieving a (non-cognitive) union with God, rather than representing facts or expressing beliefs about God. Moreover, the motives of these and other opponents of the face-value approach are not at all atheistic or anti-religious. Far

from doubting Christian doctrine, Berkeley took his attitude theory to provide an effective *response* to scepticism about the intelligibility and truth of religious doctrine by explaining how it could play an important part in Christian faith without requiring the believer to have a clear understanding of the nature of the Trinity, original sin, etc. Berkeley also saw his account as providing a better explanation for the motivational, life-changing nature of Christian faith.⁴ The apophatic theologians were motivated primarily by doubts about the conceivability of God's nature. Attitude theory provides an interpretation of religious discourse compatible with it facilitating a closer relationship with God, even if we are unable to conceive of God. And although R.B. Braithwaite was influenced by A.J. Ayer, who certainly had no sympathy for religious belief, Braithwaite's own aim was to take what he saw as successful in the logical positivists' arguments and show how religious language could satisfy the tough verificationist standards of meaning that they proposed and thereby not impede religious practice and attitudes.

Attitude theories also come in a variety of forms more plausible than the pure non-cognitivism that is often discussed. Even the most uncompromising attitude theorist should allow that in uttering a sentence such as

- (2) God will bless you for acting so generously

the speaker expresses a belief that the person addressed has been generous. There is little mileage in an attitude theory that can find no role for belief expression. There are, however, two more promising options available to attitude theorists. One is to develop an account for religious language that parallels expressivist positions in ethics.⁵ On this view, religious sentences are conventionally used to express non-cognitive attitudes. However, they may also express beliefs provided that they do not have *religious* content, and the beliefs that they express are not religious beliefs. So the religious expressivist might interpret (2) as expressing the non-religious belief that the addressee has acted generously, and also a non-cognitive attitude of approval towards the generous agent. This analysis can be written as

- (3) H! (your acting generously)

where H! stands for an attitude of approval and the bracketed comment the content. However, for sentences such as

- (4) God loves us

the resulting expressivist interpretation lacks a complete propositional content. The religious expressivist will interpret sentences like (4) as being expressive only of non-cognitive attitudes.

A second and more moderate option for attitude theorists is to agree with the face-value approach that religious sentences represent religious facts, but argue that religious sentences are conventionally used to express *both* non-cognitive attitudes and beliefs.⁶ This has the advantage of retaining the plausibility of the face-value interpretation while also explaining the motivational effects of religious belief noted by Berkeley. To see how this might be developed, the following example from Simon Blackburn (1984: 169) is useful:

If I say that someone is a Kraut, or blotto, I may express an attitude of contempt towards Germans, or of wry amusement at drunkenness, but I also say something true or false about their nationality or sobriety ... You should not use those terms unless

you also sympathize with those attitudes. But in each case it would be wrong to infer that *no* description is given from the fact that an attitude is *also* expressed.

Saying that someone is blotto is both descriptive and expressive: it expresses both belief in the fact that the person is drunk and a non-cognitive attitude of amusement about the person's condition. The moderate attitude theorist is making a comparable point about religious language: it is similar to other areas of descriptive language insofar as its sentences represent facts and are used to express beliefs in those facts, but it is different insofar as it conventionally expresses non-cognitive attitudes.

Attitude theorists face a range of challenges, although the difficulties in developing moderate attitude theory look less formidable than those facing religious expressivism. A case in point is with how to explain the complex and disciplined syntactical and semantic features of religious language. For example, religious sentences can be negated and a religious sentence and its negation cannot be true. On the face-value approach we can explain why, for example, (1) and the negation of (1) are inconsistent: they represent inconsistent facts. And we can similarly explain why one shouldn't both believe (1) and the negation of (1): they are beliefs with inconsistent content and cannot both be true. In contrast, non-cognitive states do not seem to be inconsistent. I may have contrary desires, such as the desire to eat lots of food and the desire to remain slim, and I may have conflicting plans or stances or intentions but while it may be impossible to satisfy all of these non-cognitive states, it is not inconsistent to have them. If expressivism is correct, therefore, why shouldn't we agree with both (1) and not-(1)? Doing so would not result in any failing in logical consistency. This does not, however, present the same problem for moderate attitude theory. Since religious sentences express both beliefs and non-cognitive attitudes, the same explanation of linguistic discipline is available to moderate attitude theory as to the realist.

A difficulty for all versions of attitude theory is to provide a positive account of the non-cognitive attitudes expressed by using religious sentences. Finding a positive account looks like a more difficult task for religion than the equivalent task in ethics. Since ethical sentences are characterized by distinctive predicates – good, bad, right, wrong, etc. – that seem to have a positive or negative evaluation built into them, ethical expressivists have a ready-made positive account about the attitudes expressed: ethical sentences are conventionally used to express approval or disapproval of the action or event to which the ethical predicate in question is assigned. The corresponding analysis is also straightforward. The sentence

(5) It is wrong to lie

can be interpreted as

(6) B! (lying)

where 'B!' expresses disapproval (or boo!) towards lying.

In contrast, religious predicates do not neatly divide into two classes that can be linked to the expression of approval and disapproval. Many religious sentences do not involve any clearly normative predicate – (1) is a case in point. Some religious sentences do not appear to use religious predicates at all: 'God created the world', for instance. So an outstanding requirement on religious attitude theory is to provide a plausible positive account of the non-cognitive states that religious sentences are used to express.

Religious truth

If religious sentences have truth-apt content, what makes them true? A face-value reading suggests that we should take the truth conditions of a religious sentence to be what the sentence appears to say. The truth condition for (1), for instance, should just be that God is omnipotent. However, according to religious reductionists the truth conditions for religious sentences should be given by some *other* class of non-religious sentences. Although we may appear to be talking about God when using religious discourse, we are in fact talking about some other non-religious subject.

Reductionist strategies have been a major topic of debate in philosophy. Two notable cases are behaviourism and phenomenalism. Behaviourism, in its 'analytical' or 'logical' form, takes the truth of sentences about a person's mental states to be determined by facts about that person's behaviour and dispositions. Phenomenalism is the view that the truth conditions for sentences about the external world should be given by sentences about our actual or possible experiences. For example, the truth of 'There is a chair in the next room' might be determined by the truth of the conditional 'Were one to go into the next room, one would see a chair', thereby reducing a sentence about the external world to a sentence about what one would perceive under certain circumstances. Reductionism is usually motivated by metaphysical or epistemological worries about the apparent subject matter of the discourse (metaphysical objections to dualism in the case of behaviourism and scepticism about the external world in the case of phenomenalism). Many religious reductionists aim to give an analysis of religious language that makes its content compatible with a monistic (materialist) metaphysics or naturalism. For a naturalist wishing to preserve religious discourse, or at least to avoid outright atheism, a truth-conditional reductionism that reduces sentences about God to sentences about nature as a whole (which would be a reductive form of pantheism) or to sentences about parts of nature, presents an interesting option.

A version of the monistic-pantheistic reduction is suggested by Spinoza.⁷ One of the most influential defenders of pantheism, Spinoza also suggested ways of interpreting sentences about God in terms of facts about nature. For example, he writes:

By God's direction I mean the fixed and immutable order of Nature, or chain of natural events ... the universal laws of Nature according to which all things happen and are determined are nothing but God's eternal decrees, which always involve eternal truth and necessity. So it is the same thing whether we say that all things happen according to Nature's laws or that they are regulated by God's decree and direction.

(2002: 417)

Since all human actions are, according to Spinoza, the product of the predetermined order of nature, then we can – following the reductive strategy – say that nobody acts except by the will of God. Similarly, since anything that we can achieve is the product either of our own actions and/or of external conditions, all such achievements can be understood as the result of divine providence.

Naturalistic reductions were defended by several British and American writers on religion in the early twentieth century. Julian Huxley suggested that talk of God could be understood as a way of talking about forces operating in nature or about aspects of nature that we do not understand. He also gave naturalistic interpretations of other Christian concepts such as the Holy Ghost and the son of God: 'God the Father is a personification of the forces of non-human Nature; God the Holy Ghost represents all ideals; and God the Son personifies human nature at its highest ... and the unity of the three persons as "One God" represents the fact that all these

aspects of reality are inextricably connected' (Huxley 1927/1957: 37). Henry Wieman, a significant figure in the American 'religious empiricism' tradition (Frankenberry 2005) identified God with natural processes in the universe that yield or facilitate ethically or socially desirable results. For example, he suggests that God is 'that interaction between individuals, groups, and ages which generates and promotes the greatest possible mutuality of good' (Wieman 1932: 15), or God is 'that interaction which sustains and magnifies personality ... the process of progressive integration' (ibid. 351). He adds that God – conceived of as an 'interaction' – can be the proper object of love and of prayer: 'Can men pray to an interaction? Yes, that is what they always pray to, under any concept of God. Can men love an interaction? Yes, that is what they always love' (ibid. 17). At around the same period, Wittgenstein also supported a reductionist analysis but he favoured a reduction to mental states. In 'A Lecture on Ethics' from 1929, Wittgenstein (1993: 42) distinguishes two states, a 'wonder at the existence of the world' and 'the experience of feeling absolutely safe'. He then comments:

[T]he first of [these experiences] is, I believe, exactly what people were referring to when they said that God had created the world; and the experience of absolute safety has been described by saying that we feel safe in the hands of God. A third experience of the same kind is that of feeling guilty and again this was described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct.

More recently, Gordon Kaufman (2007: 12), a leading figure in the development of modern liberal theology, has argued that 'God' is the name given to the 'pervasive mystery' that gives life meaning. The claim that God is 'absolute' or 'ineffable', Kaufman contends, expresses the fact that God is a profound mystery. And the claims that God is 'real' or 'exists' should be understood as expressing the belief that underpinning this 'pervasive mystery' are natural forces that promote and facilitate ethical, aesthetic, and social human flourishing: 'Speech about the Christian God as "real" or "existent" expresses symbolically this conviction that free and loving persons-in-community have a substantial metaphysical foundation, that there are cosmic forces working toward this sort of humanization' (Kaufman 1981: 49).

A major obstacle to any religious reductionism as a theory of religious language is that it is highly revisionary. Consider the kind of naturalist reduction proposed by Huxley and others whereby the name 'God' refers to a class of naturalistic processes. The interpretation of some religious sentences will be fairly straightforward. For instance, the truth-condition for

(7) God exists

can be given by

(8) *Such-and-such* natural processes exist

where *such-and-such* stands for the evolutionary or physical or other natural processes that the reductionist takes to be scientifically respectable. Reductionists will thereby be able to endorse (7) and (8). Reductionists also have an account of how to interpret sentences about divine action. For instance, the truth-condition for

(9) God sustains us

can be given by

(10) *Such-and-such* natural processes sustain us.

However, many sentences that ascribe properties to God look more troublesome. Consider, for example,

(11) God is omniscient.

What truth-conditions should the reductionist give for (11)? Interpreting this as saying that *such-and-such* natural processes are omniscient would evidently render the sentence false. Similarly, many sentences about God's properties that are widely agreed-upon by religious believers – that God is just, merciful, loving, etc. – will be false on the reductionist interpretation. In addition, reductionists do not offer any interpretation of a variety of religious claims that are not about God, such as 'Jesus is risen', 'There will be a Last Judgment', etc. Without a reductionist analysis, and given their incompatibility with naturalism, the reductionist will have to find these sentences false. In general, it seems that reductionism will result in an error theory for a wide range of religious sentences. This makes religious reductionism difficult to motivate. Why attempt to preserve religious discourse if so much of it is in error? It seems that a better approach would be to eliminate religious discourse in favour of talk about the naturalistic subject that the reductionist takes to be metaphysically and epistemologically respectable.

There is a different line of anti-realist resistance to the face-value reading of the truth conditions of religious sentences. Rather than follow the reductionist strategy of replacing religious truth conditions with non-religious ones, *minimalists* propose an anti-realist reading of what constitutes religious truth. Wittgenstein's later (and post-reductionist) work is particularly influential on this variety of anti-realism; Hilary Putnam and Dewi Phillips are leading proponents. There are two central ideas to minimalism. First, religious discourse is understood as a language game or collection of language games with its own internal standards of truth, justification, and reference. These standards are identified by looking at the practices of those who engage in the discourse. So whereas empirical evidence may be a critical standard of justification operative in scientific discourse, evidence from a sacred text or the word of a religious authority may constitute satisfactory standards of justification in religious discourse. Second, there are no essential cross-discourse standards of truth (hence it is to be understood 'minimally'). Instead, the key notions of truth, reference, and justification are taken to be constituted (at least in part) by features specific to the discourse in question. Commenting on reference (but the point could equally be made about the concept of truth in religious language), Putnam (1992: 168) writes:

The use of religious language is both like and unlike ordinary cases of reference: but to ask whether it is 'really' reference or 'not really' reference is to be in a muddle. There is no essence of reference. ... In short, Wittgenstein is telling you what *isn't* the way to understand religious language. The way to understand religious language isn't to try to apply some metaphysical classification of possible forms of discourse.

Instead, we need to consider the 'life we lead with our concepts' to determine the content of reference, truth, etc. in each discourse. According to Phillips (1995: 138),

By all means say that 'God' functions as a referring expression, that 'God' refers to a sort of object, that God's reality is a matter of fact, and so on. *But please remember that, as yet, no conceptual or grammatical clarification has taken place.* We have all the work still to do since we shall now have to show, in the religious context what speaking of

‘reference’, ‘object’, ‘existence’, and so on amounts to, how it differs, in obvious ways, from other uses of these terms.

As Phillips indicates, the minimalist allows that religious claims are true, religious expressions refer, etc., but proposes that what counts as a true sentence or referring expression depends on standards that are local to the discourse in question. For realists, this seems an unacceptable relativisation of truth: if God created the world, then this should be a scientific truth just as much as a religious truth.

Most critical discussion of minimalism focuses on its supposed fideistic implications: the minimalist, in effect, partitions religious discourse from other regions of discourse, immunizing it to criticism on non-religious grounds (see Nielsen 2000). However, perhaps a more pressing difficulty for minimalism as a plausible theory of religious language is the fact that we take sentences of religious language to stand in logical and explanatory relations with non-religious sentences. We can, for example, use apparently descriptive sentences as the premises of arguments that have religious conclusions. For instance:

- (12a) The earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old;
- (12b) If the earth is approximately 4.5 billion years old, then the earth was not created by God in approximately 5000 BCE;
- (12c) therefore, God did not create the world in approximately 5000 BCE.

If the concept of truth operative in religious discourse is different from the one in geology, as minimalists seem to suggest, then this argument is invalid. However, it appears to be valid. This generates a problem for minimalism. For if the linguistic evidence that minimalists are using to analyze the concept of truth is drawn from the practical use of religious language by religious believers, then the fact that (12a)–(12c) is taken as valid should itself constitute evidence that there is a continuity in the concept of truth between religious and scientific discourse.

Religious discourse

Suppose the realist is right about the face-value reading of both the content and truth-conditions of religious language. Anti-realists may still argue that in using religious language, speakers are not committed to the truth of what they are saying. This position, called *fictionalism*, comes in two forms. Revolutionary fictionalists argue that although many religious beliefs are false, it is possible to engage in religious discourse in a morally and intellectually respectable way without actually holding religious beliefs. This is similar to the position described in relating to Don Cupitt. Another notable recent proponent of religion without religious belief is Peter Lipton (2007). However, there is also hermeneutic fictionalism according to which speakers, despite appearances, do not really believe what they are saying. No change in attitude is needed: fictionalism already accurately describes the meaning of religious utterances. Since we are focusing on non-revisionary theories of religious language, is hermeneutic fictionalism about religion defensible?

Hermeneutic fictionalism may seem plausible for some fields of discourse. Fictional discourse itself is an example, since participants in a fiction appear to make assertions and express beliefs but we do not take them, nor do they take themselves, to be lying. But defending hermeneutic fictionalism in the religious case seems particularly challenging since religious ‘believers’ clearly take themselves to be asserting truths and expressing beliefs. However, Georges Rey (2006) has defended a position akin to hermeneutic religious fictionalism that he calls *meta-atheism*. Since

this offers perhaps the most interesting attempt to support the fictionalist position, I will devote the rest of this section to evaluating it.⁸

Rey's way around the apparent implausibility of the theory is to argue that, among practitioners of religion, there is widespread self-deception:

Despite appearances, many Western adults who've been exposed to standard science and sincerely claim to believe in God are self-deceived; at some level they believe the claim is false.

(2006: 337)

For anyone with a basic education in science, Rey contends, it is entirely *obvious* that religious claims are false. Rey is not suggesting, however, that educated religious people are being deceitful or insincere when they make religious claims, since they may think of themselves as believing what they are saying: 'insincerity arises when someone *says* something, intending it to be believed, that they consciously know full well they wouldn't avow' (ibid. 338). Among the reasons why religious people do not consciously draw out the implications of their disbelief, Rey suggests the following: loyalty to family and other social groups; personal ties and identifications with religious institutions; resistance to changing one's public stance; and the wish for one's life to be part of a larger project. To establish hermeneutic religious fictionalism, he would need to adopt an account of self-deception in the religious case such that religious avowals do not express beliefs; while Rey states a preference for this account, he does not reject alternatives. Nevertheless, he provides the basis for hermeneutic religious fictionalism: when (suitably educated) religious people profess to believe in God they are not actually expressing religious beliefs.

I do not propose to evaluate the fictionalist's claim that religious beliefs are false. However, Rey makes the much stronger claim that religious beliefs are *obviously* false, which he needs in order to motivate his contention that religious people know 'at some level' that what they purport to believe is false. There are two stages to Rey's argument for this claim. First, he distinguishes (a) serious and difficult 'philosophical' issues, such as the existence of universals or the nature of meaning, from (b) 'shallow' empirical issues that do not merit serious philosophical consideration and that can be settled without difficulty by observation and reflection, such as the existence of ghosts or gremlins. Rey proposes to put claims about God into the latter category. However, religious questions are treated and have been treated very seriously, over many centuries, by philosophers who are neither frivolous nor unintelligent. So Rey needs to show that philosophers have been wrong to treat religious questions seriously: this is the second stage of his argument. He does this by briefly setting out standard problems for belief in God – for example, that natural evil 'provides reason to doubt there's any such being' (ibid. 340) – and objections to arguments for the existence of God (for example, that the design argument 'can't be taken seriously since Darwin').

Rey's strategy is unconvincing. In the space of just a few pages, Rey can do little more than rehearse the starting points of various familiar anti-theistic arguments in philosophy of religion. His claim that the occurrence of natural evil provides an argument against the existence of a benevolent God, for example, is not the knockout blow to religious belief he seems to take it to be, but just the opening gambit of a debate that has generated a huge literature. Perhaps Rey would argue that most of this literature has been of low philosophical quality (though can we speak much more highly about all the literature on universals?); but what he needs for his argument is that there is *nothing* to take seriously on this topic in the philosophy of religion. Rey doesn't establish this; treating a topic as if it shouldn't be taken seriously does not show that topic isn't serious. Moreover, it seems patently false: Aren't J.L. Mackie's 'Evil and

Omnipotence' or Alvin Plantinga's *God, Freedom and Evil* philosophically serious and rather good and interesting works? Rey could argue that Mackie and Plantinga are in different ways self-deceived (Plantinga for defending a view that 'at some level' he knows is obviously false; Mackie for taking seriously a topic that he knows 'at some level' obviously does not merit it) – but this would be question-begging. The obvious falsity of religious belief needs to be established to argue that people are self-deceived about it.

Rey does have a supplementary argument. Religious discourse exhibits features that, he suggests, show that it is 'understood to be fictional from the start' (ibid. 345). Rey offers three main pieces of evidence for this. First, religious claims rely on texts and authorities for their support that are largely insensitive to (in the Christian case) biblical scholarship or historical assessment (ibid. 344). In contrast, science has no sacred texts and only 'provisional' figures of authority; the authority of a scientist or a scientific text depends on the degree to which what they say is supported by current research. Second, religious claims are *detail resistant*. For example, in the Christian story of the creation of the universe, in the information given on how the creation happened – how exactly God brought the universe into existence, how his intervention occurred, the sequence of events, etc. – very few details are provided and no serious research is conducted. In contrast, there is extremely detailed information available about the origins of life and the universe and extensive ongoing scientific research programs underway that continue to fill in more of those details. Third, Rey thinks that religious discourse resembles fictional discourse because of the tolerance religious people show to what he takes to be patently 'delusional' and 'idiosyncratic' claims. The story of Abraham obeying God's command to sacrifice his son is given as an example. In summary, Rey proposes that the use of religious discourse betrays the sketchiness, the lack of supporting evidence (and lack of interest in supporting evidence), and tolerance of fantastic implausibilities that also characterize our use of fiction.

Even if Rey's view that religious beliefs are obviously false is unpersuasive, does his supplementary argument about the similarities of religious and fictional discourses lend support to his meta-atheist theory that religious people do not believe 'at some level' their own religious claims? The problem with Rey's argument is that it relies on a misleading comparison between the claims of the majority of (educated) practising religious people and *professional* scientists. If we look at scientific discourse as it is employed by most people – those with the same basic education in the field that Rey assumes in the religious case – it does not look in much better shape than religious discourse with respect to the criteria that Rey proposes. Take a quite simply stated and understood scientific theory, such as the Darwinian theory of evolution. Most people who claim to believe this theory have little knowledge of or interest in the evidence in its favour (they might think that it has something to do with the fossil record, perhaps) and will happily appeal to authority to justify it: it is the leading theory in biology textbooks and is widely supported by biologists. One does not generally find among people prepared to assert that the Darwinian evolutionary theory is true on the basis of scientific authorities anything comparable to the checking of texts and historical evidence that Rey finds suspiciously absent among people who make religious claims on the basis of biblical authority (ibid. 343). Similarly, most people's understanding of scientific theories is often sketchy, informed by metaphor, and limited to a superficial level of detail: it is detail resistant. Rey's third point that some religious claims are delusional seems to be rhetorically of a piece with his contention that they should not be treated seriously. If his point is just that some religious claims presented in certain contexts can look bizarre, then the same applies to some scientific claims – notably some of the central claims of quantum mechanics.

Rey could persist with this argument by conceding that most people's use of religious *and* scientific discourse is akin to their use of fictional discourse, but that in the professional use of

scientific discourse (and not in the religious case) there are no ultimate authorities and it is possible to fill in the details of theories. Rey's position would then be that while both religious and scientific discourse are widely used as fiction, religious discourse is comprehensively fictional, whereas in science there are professionals who can credibly be said to believe what they are saying. To establish this, however, Rey would need to show that there is no comparable group of professional theologians (Bible scholars, systematic theologians, etc.) who have religious beliefs – something he does not attempt to do. A good starting point would be to show that religious claims are obviously false; as we have seen, however, Rey's arguments for this are unsuccessful. Neither Rey's argument about self-deception nor his comparison of religious and fictional discourse, therefore, provide good reason for meta-atheism. Neither do they establish hermeneutic religious fictionalism.

As a final point, even if cogent and compelling arguments could be made in favour of meta-atheism, more work would be needed to establish hermeneutic religious fictionalism. For meta-atheism to be a form of religious fictionalism, a particular account of self-deception is required.⁹ It is not essential for hermeneutic religious fictionalism that religious people have formed the belief, on any 'level', that their religious claims are false; what is essential is that they do not believe that what they are saying is true or, at least, that if they have any religious beliefs – if they exist on some 'level' – those beliefs are not expressed in their religious avowals. Rey writes: 'I can well imagine someone regarding self-deceptive beliefs as genuine beliefs, and as simply manifesting ways in which people's beliefs can be bizarrely irrational and compartmentalized', and 'there may be *further* levels at which [religious people] may also believe in God' (ibid. 337). In other words, the arguments for meta-atheism are compatible with accounts of self-deception that are not consistent with hermeneutic religious fictionalism. If religious people believe their religious claims and 'at some level' believe those religious claims are false but do not recognize this inconsistency because of compartmentalization of their beliefs, then meta-atheism will be true and hermeneutic religious fictionalism false. So even if – contrary to what we have found – there are good arguments for meta-atheism, a successful hermeneutic religious fictionalism will require an argument for Rey's preferred account of self-deception.

Conclusion

We have reviewed three main lines of dispute between realists and anti-realists about religious language and found in each case that anti-realism falls short of providing a compelling alternative. We should note, however, that religious anti-realism has yet to receive the kind of detailed and clearly argued defence in the philosophy of religion that other kinds of anti-realism have received in other areas of analytic philosophy. Notably, expressivism remains a resilient anti-realist option in ethics, while moderate forms of attitude theory and fictionalism have recently received extensive attention. There are plenty of currently unutilized resources available to religious anti-realists by considering comparable arguments developed for anti-realism in other philosophical fields.

Notes

- 1 I don't exclude the possibility of religious sentences that do not have a religious subject matter. The Song of Songs, for example, has little in the way of religious content but might be considered religious language and its use part of religious discourse. However, I take the cases considered here to constitute a region of religious language of most immediate philosophical interest, with language that posits God being most central; it also captures the scope of religious language as it has been addressed in the philosophy of religion.

- 2 While there is no formal statement of belief with which its members are expected to agree, I think this is in line with the position set out by Don Cupitt (1984) and the views of many of its participants.
- 3 For a discussion of Berkeley's views, see Oppy and Scott (2010: 19–32).
- 4 For more on the motivation argument, see Blackburn (1998: 97–100).
- 5 See Blackburn (1998); for a different model of expressivism see Gibbard (1990).
- 6 This mixture of cognitivism and expressivism has become an increasingly popular option in ethics. See, for example, Copp (2001).
- 7 For a discussion see Mason (2007).
- 8 A different kind of fictionalist position, that construes talk of God as irreducibly metaphorical, is pursued by Anthony Kenny (2004).
- 9 This is not, of course, a problem for Rey since he does not claim to be a religious fictionalist; it is, however, an issue for any hermeneutic religious fictionalists hoping to employ Rey's arguments for meta-atheism.

ANALOGY, METAPHOR, AND LITERAL LANGUAGE

Roger M. White

We may set up the problem to be discussed in this chapter by considering the famous slogan of the early Karl Barth: God is ‘wholly other’ (*‘ganz anders’*). Barth later described this phrase as a ‘battle cry’ rather than a precise theological statement, but it will serve to define our problem. What has not usually been noticed is that the phrase is radically ambiguous, with two quite different meanings, each of which is relevant in different ways to the task before us. As it is most frequently interpreted, it signifies the absolute qualitative difference between God and anything creaturely – that ‘you cannot talk about God by talking about man in a loud voice’. However, although that was part of Barth’s intent, what made it a ‘battle cry’, signalling his opposition to his nineteenth-century predecessors, is another, quite distinct reading of the phrase. If we talk of God as ‘wholly other’ – ‘completely different’ – we have to ask ‘different from what?’ Barth’s opponents could certainly allow for God’s transcendence and refuse to identify Him with any worldly phenomenon. What Barth was protesting against was another sort of domestication of God, a different sort of anthropomorphism in which we project onto God our values, aspirations and fears, imagining God in terms of what we conceive to be the highest form of human morality, religion, or culture. God becomes a cupola erected upon our human religion and morality: ‘Gott ist noch ganz anders, und das wahre Leben ist noch ganz anders, als du dir es jetzt einbildest!’ (Barth 1913: 252).¹

The question then immediately arises: ‘How is it possible to use human language to speak and think responsibly about such a God?’ Human language – the only language we have, and can have – is the language that has evolved and that we have learnt for talking about human beings, their relations, and their empirical environment. What is more, such a language is deeply imbued with human values, fears, and aspirations. Does not the use of such a language inevitably compromise the radical difference between God and everything in the universe that He has created? Can we talk about God’s activity without equating it with human activity or at least assimilating it to one or another of the causal processes with which we are familiar, or talk about God’s love and compassion without seeing Him as subject to human passions, or talk of the justice of God without thinking of the last judgment as a law court meting out punishment for crime? In brief, can we talk about God while retaining the meaningfulness of the language we use, without lapsing into crude or subtle anthropomorphism, and without simply projecting onto God our human wishes and ideals?

The questions involved here are not just abstract technical questions: unless we have an appropriate answer to them, we shall seriously misrepresent belief in God. Atheists will then be tilting at windmills, while believers have a gravely distorted faith.

In the present chapter, I shall examine and compare two traditional answers to these questions, on the one hand that the linguistic use of analogy provides the key, and on the other hand that religious claims are all to be interpreted metaphorically. Both proposed answers have a long history, represented classically by Aquinas and by Maimonides, respectively. I shall look at Aquinas in what follows, but here we may sketch the broad thrust of Maimonides' position. For Maimonides, God's transcendence was such that it was impossible to make any claims that were literally true of Him. All that was possible would be a purely negative theology.² If you say this, however, you are confronted by the fact that God is apparently spoken of in the ways that have been declared illegitimate not only by believers, but also above all in the Hebrew Bible. The reply is that we are to take all *this* use of language about God as metaphorical.

Here is an initial statement of the difference between the two approaches. On the one hand, those who have advocated a metaphorical theology have supposed that literal uses of language are completely inadequate to the task at hand, and have therefore identified a need to resort to purely non-literal figurative uses of language such as metaphorical uses of language. On the other hand, those – from Aquinas to Kant and Barth – who advocate the way of analogy have seen the apparent impasse at this point as arising from an overly simplified conception of the resources to be found within the literal uses of language, and have insisted that, with appropriate safeguards, there are literal ways of speaking of God that still respect the radical otherness of God.

In what follows I shall look in turn at these two approaches and argue that, despite an initial apparent similarity, the difference between them runs deep. Since the way of analogy has, beginning with the Enlightenment, been widely misunderstood, I shall spend time simply expounding it.

Analogy

To be sure, the debate about analogy has usually been carried on within recent Evangelical theology with an astonishing lack of understanding and horrifying carelessness.

(Jüngel 1977: 281)

It is easy to sympathize with this. In fact the situation is worse than Jüngel indicates. As part of the reaction in the Enlightenment against scholastic philosophy there was a widespread suspicion of appeals to analogy, and a broad misunderstanding of the way the term had traditionally been used. As a result it has been used with considerable looseness, sometimes meaning little more than similarity, or even as a synonym for metaphor. Even in the crucial debate over the nature of the analogy between God and the world between Erich Przywara (1932), Karl Barth (especially Barth 1940), Gottlieb Söhngen (1934) and Hans Urs von Balthasar (1951) we find, beginning with Przywara's idiosyncratic use of traditional terminology, a lack of clarity as to how the language of analogy is to be understood.³ As a result, the occasions for misunderstanding among themselves and in further discussions are rife. The point here is not a pedantic insistence that there is only one proper way to use the word 'analogy', but rather that, unless an author strives to make clear precisely what is to be understood by it, the whole discussion becomes opaque. The contrast with medieval discussions of analogy here is sharp: there, among the major theologians, it is almost invariably possible to grasp their meaning, whether you agree with it or not. It is this earlier use of the word that is not only precisely statable, but also that provides the distinctions necessary for theological discussion.

The second confusion current with the word ‘analogy’ is the failure to distinguish analogy and metaphor. In everyday usage, people will frequently describe a metaphor as an analogy, but again for clarity of discussion the two concepts need to be kept separate. William Alston (1989: 19) writes:

I believe that in many cases in which writers speak of ‘analogy’, ‘symbols’, ‘parables’, or ‘models’, the basic linguistic mechanism is that of metaphor.

Alston goes on to cite some authors whom he regards as ‘guilty’, including Bultmann and Barth. In both these cases, such a reading would lead to a travesty of their positions.

With these warnings, we now explore the ways in which the linguistic application of analogy is to be understood in talking about God.

The Aristotelian background

The inevitable starting point for our enquiry is Aristotle. He shows great sensitivity to and frequently draws attention to the ways in which significant words in our language have several different but interrelated uses. Among these cases of words ‘said in many ways’ he identifies two patterns of usage designated as ‘homonymous but not by chance’:

But in what way are different things called ‘good’? For they do not seem to be called by the same word by chance homonymy. Possibly they are all called ‘good’ because they derive from one good, or all contribute to one good. Or perhaps they are called ‘good’ by analogy: for as sight is good in the body, so is reason in the soul, and similarly another thing in something else.

(Nicomachean Ethics, I 1096b 28)

I shall give a preliminary sketch of these two possibilities, both of which play a key role in all the subsequent discussion. Although later discussions will describe both of these possibilities as ‘said by analogy’, Aristotle himself always only uses the term for the second. In this sense, an analogy is a four term relation ‘A is to B as C is to D’. Aristotle’s interest in this is that it is this formula that permits us to compare ‘things that are remote’ – things that are too unlike to share common intrinsic properties or are even in different categories, and so cannot be compared directly, can still be compared by introducing a third and fourth thing and comparing the first’s relation to the third with the second’s relation to the fourth. To take an example that he gives from Archytas of Tarentum: consider the concept *calm*. This concept is explained by the formula ‘windlessness is to the sky as wavelessness is to the sea’. We may clearly extend this pattern so as to talk of a calm mind or a situation being calm after a riot. We see here how in virtue of an underlying analogy the same word may be intelligibly applied to radically different things.

The second of Aristotle’s patterns of words ‘being said in many ways’ is explored by him at *Metaphysics* IV, 1003a33–1033b18. Here the basic idea is that we may distinguish a primary use and a range of secondary uses of a word. This is best understood by looking at one of Aristotle’s own examples. Consider the word ‘healthy’. We may talk of a healthy cow, a healthy climate, a healthy complexion, and so on. Of these, the primary use of the word is illustrated by ‘a healthy cow’, and the others are secondary uses. Roughly speaking it is only animals and plants that are ‘really’ healthy. There is a clear ordering of priority and posteriority, which can be explained by saying that one may explain what it is for an animal to be healthy, whereas one cannot explain what is meant by describing a climate as healthy without mentioning its relation to the health of

animals. The priority claimed here is a purely *linguistic* priority: in the case where the primary use of 'F' is to say that 'As are F' and a secondary use to say that 'Bs are F', we can explain what it is for A to be F without mentioning Bs, but we can only explain what it is for B to be F by explaining the relation of Bs that are F to As that are F: a healthy climate is one that promotes health in animals.

Are we to say that such words are ambiguous? It is rather that our normal criteria for sameness and difference in sense leave us in the lurch: The question 'Do we mean the same thing by "calm" when we talk of a calm sea and a calm mind?' has no obvious answer. Aquinas talked here of these cases as lying between univocation and equivocation (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 1a 13 5). I take it that the thought here is that the word 'healthy' is univocal in its various uses, in that all refer to one and the same thing, *health*, but equivocal in that they refer to it in different ways. Perhaps the best thing to say – and I believe that this was Aristotle's intention – is that although these various uses of the same word clearly belong together, it is not in terms of the objects to which the word is applied sharing a common property.

As Aristotle's discussions make clear, we are talking about pervasive and familiar features of natural language. If, then, appeals to analogy can, in principle, explain how it is possible to use human language to talk about God and yet respect His radical difference from any worldly phenomena, then the claim is being made that our ordinary language, just as it is, can in principle make genuine claims about a God who is 'wholly other'. The appearance to the contrary would then rest on an impoverished conception of the resources of that ordinary language. This is so even if there are respects in which the theological application of these words is *sui generis*.

Systematicity

As just said, when Aristotle talks of words 'said in many ways', he contrasts the cases which concern him with 'chance homonymy'. To make sense of his discussion the notion of chance has to be taken strictly. There are many cases where a word is used in more than one way, where there is a relation between the two uses that falls short of being 'not by chance' in the sense required. Consider the word 'species': it is used in a logical sense and in a biological sense, among others. These are two quite distinct senses of the word 'species', but there is a quite intelligible connection between these two senses, and to that extent it is 'not by chance' that we use the word in these two ways. However, the reason that the word has these two senses is due to an historical accident, dating from an earlier time when it was thought that the different animal species could be defined using the logical notion of species, dividing the animal kingdom using the machinery of genus and species. To that extent, it is still by chance that the word is used in these two ways. In such a case we can easily suppose that there are people who are familiar with the word in its biological sense but who are wholly ignorant of its logical sense. As opposed to this, the various words that Aristotle is concerned with belong together in a much stronger sense. The various different ways of using the word go together to constitute a single use. Here if someone learns a word like 'calm' at all, they learn to use it in all its different applications. What is more, this use is *generative*: we can understand novel applications just as a simple continuation of its use in the applications with which we are familiar.

The importance of this point in the present context is that this means that, if we can develop an appropriate theory of analogy, our ordinary human language, just as it stands, has at least the potential to talk of God, while still respecting the radical otherness of God. I shall look at the question of how Aristotle's two patterns can be exploited in this way. In this I shall follow medieval practice and call them both species of analogy, such that what Aristotle called 'analogy' is called 'the analogy of proportionality', and his other pattern 'the analogy of attribution'.

Analogy of proportionality

If it can be applied in such a way as to give a coherent account of language about God, the attractions of Aristotelian analogy, the ‘analogy of proportionality’, are clear. The theme that runs through all Aristotle’s writings about analogy is that there are two different ways of comparing things – a direct comparison, noting common properties of the two things, and an indirect comparison according to the formula A is to B as C is to D. The interest of the second comparison is that it enables us to make comparisons that are too unlike for any direct comparison to be possible, even comparisons across the Aristotelian categories. We can for instance represent the changes in the popularity of a political party by the rising and falling of a line on a graph. It is because of this ability to explain comparisons between things that are completely unlike that, for instance, Cajetan gives this analogy pride of place in his account of analogy.

The question then is: How is the formula A is to B as C is to D to be understood in our context? We may mention three interpretations that have been given.

(Cajetan 1959: 5)

Although there is no trace of this in Aquinas, for a long time, Thomists, under the influence of Cajetan, supplemented their account of Aquinas with a formula along the lines ‘God’s justice is to God’s being as human justice is to human being’ (see for example Garrigou-Lagrange 1914: 218). This has now largely been abandoned as a misunderstanding of Aquinas, and an unnecessary addition to his account. For me, the major difficulty is that I do not understand what it means. (What is the relation of God’s justice to His being?)

Very differently, Kant (1783: §§ 57–59) gives an account that compares God’s activity with human activity, using such examples as God is to the world as a builder is to a ship or a general to a regiment. In fact, of the authors that I mention, only Kant seeks to give an account appealing *only* to the analogy of proportionality. In so doing he brings out one of the limitations of an account exclusively in terms of this analogy. Kant’s whole theology stresses God’s transcendence as a purely noumenal being, whose nature as He is in Himself is wholly unknown to us. From Kant’s perspective, he is content that God’s nature as He is in Himself should remain wholly unknowable by us; all that matters is the implications for religious life of His governance of the world. What the analogy of proportionality gives to Kant is not ‘an imperfect similarity between two things, but rather a perfect similarity between two relations in wholly dissimilar things’ (ibid. § 58). What this means is that correctly understood this tells us *nothing* about God’s nature but only about His relation to the world. If we are told that God governs the universe, all that amounts to is that the universe is governed by something.

Barth, who develops his main account in Vol. II of the *Church Dogmatics* in terms of an analogy of attribution, complements this in Vol. III with a use of the analogy of proportionality which he terms an *analogia relationis*. From the very outset Barth develops his account within a Trinitarian context, coupled with his conception of the image of God in humanity. This is presented in two stages: in the first the Father’s relation to the Son is mirrored in God’s relation to the creation (Barth 1948: 220), and in the second the Father’s relation to the Son is mirrored in human relations – man’s relation to his neighbour (paradigmatically, the relation of man and woman) (ibid. 323–24). This depends upon a particular construal of the doctrine of the image: ‘God is in relationship, and so too is the man created by Him. This is his divine likeness’ (ibid. 324). These two patterns are elaborated in a rich variety of ways, but at bottom it rests on a rejection of the traditional conception of the image consisting in some property of humanity – such as rationality, in favour of seeing *relations* between human beings as echoing, however defectively, relations within the Godhead.

Both Kant's and Barth's applications of the analogy of proportionality make perfect sense, given their respective theologies. The question left open is the question of the qualitative superiority of God to humanity – Aristotelian analogy is a symmetric relation, so without qualification this analogy would seem to place God and humanity on a level. This is why Barth develops his account in a context that has already used the analogy of attribution, to which I now turn.

Analogy of attribution

At first sight, the analogy of attribution looks a much less promising basis for an account of talking about God. After all, when we say that the climate is healthy all we mean is that it promotes health, but when we say that God is just, we are not merely saying that God is related to other things that are just, but that He is just in Himself. It was for this reason that Cajetan advocated the analogy of proportionality.

However, the apparent difficulty here only arises if we restrict our attention to a narrow range of examples. The general notion of the analogy of attribution is that if *A* is called *F* in the primary use of *F*, *B* is called *F* in the secondary use, if *B* is related to *A*. There is wide variety in the possible relations between *A* and *B*, and an example such as 'healthy/healthy' is potentially misleading and almost certainly responsible for the idea that the analogy of attribution is powerless to express what we really mean in talking about God.

To understand the classic advocacy of the analogy of attribution – that of Aquinas – we must start with his idea of 'equivocal [or analogical] causation' (Aquinas 1955: Chapter 29). His initial premise is that every effect resembles its cause. In the simplest case, 'univocal causation', the cause and the effect share a common property, but in some cases there is a diminution and the effect receives from its cause a lesser property than that of its cause. He illustrates this with a case that relies on medieval cosmology. The Sun heats a stone. But the Sun is an immutable and incorruptible body, whereas a stone is only capable of the heat with which we are familiar, which is a property of mutable bodies. We therefore posit in the Sun a superior version of heat, which is a different property from familiar heat. However, since the Sun's heat is responsible for that of the stone, there is a likeness between the two properties. Leaving on one side the obsolete cosmology which is only there for illustrative purposes, we turn to the case of God. God is goodness itself and, as such, is the cause of all goodnesses that we find in the world. Since the effect resembles its cause, these goodnesses resemble God's goodness, but in a diminished form. On this conception, the primary application of words such as 'good', 'just' and 'wise' is their application to God, since other things are called 'good', 'just' and 'wise' only in so far as they approach God. It is God's goodness which is the standard by which all other goodnesses are judged. It is important to recognize that although this account is developed in a causal context, the *linguistic* theory can be stated without reference to that causal background: when we say God is 'just', that is the primary use of the term; and when we describe earthly instances of justice as 'just', that is a secondary use, since they are only so-called in virtue of their resemblance to divine justice.⁴

Barth's whole approach to his appeal to the analogy of attribution is completely different. Although he agrees with Aquinas that the primary use of the words to be used in talking about God is their application to God, and their everyday use in human affairs is a secondary use, his grounds for this are not in any kind of metaphysical theory, but are based purely upon the scriptural witness to divine revelation. When we encounter God's self-revelation – above all in Jesus Christ – we encounter for the first time what true lordship, love, wisdom, power and kingship really are, and realize that what we had elsewhere described by those terms

were caricatures of the real thing, and that it is only in a secondary sense that they can be so described.

Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.

(I Cor. 1 20–21)

Both Aquinas and Barth are in the apparently paradoxical position of claiming that the primary use of the words we use may not be their everyday mundane use, but a use with which the natural man may be unfamiliar. This is the issue that must now be addressed.

Semantic externalism

Someone such as Barth or Aquinas, who takes the analogy of attribution as the basis for their account of religious language, is committed to the idea that the primary use of the words that we use in speaking of God is not their familiar, everyday use, but their application to God Himself. How can words such as 'Lord', 'just' or 'wise' apply in the first instance to God, and not to the human beings that we ordinarily describe by these words, particularly since the only way we can learn to use these words is by seeing them applied to human beings?

The answer given by both Aquinas (1265–74/1964–74: Ia 13, 2) and Barth (1940: 227–29) is to appeal to a form of what is now called 'semantic externalism'. Semantic externalism is an idea introduced into recent discussions in the philosophy of language by Saul Kripke (1972) and Hilary Putnam (1975). The claim is that for a wide range of cases, when we use those words to designate features of reality, the meanings of those words are to be explained not in terms of our ideas of what those features are, but in terms of the actual nature of the features themselves, including features which may be completely unknown to the speakers of the language. This can be understood best by considering what is for me one of the most intuitively plausible cases – the names of diseases. Diseases are typically first identified by a syndrome of symptoms before the causes of those symptoms are known. In many cases, those causes will be unknown to the layman and sometimes even to the medical profession. Nevertheless, there is a strong case for saying that we use the name of the disease to designate not the symptoms but the underlying pathology. Thus measles is a viral infection caused by a paramyxovirus of the genus *Morbillivirus*. It is safe to say that the vast majority of users of the word 'measles' are completely unaware of that fact. Nevertheless it is right to say that they use the word as a name of a viral infection and not of its familiar symptoms. There are two reasons for saying this, one of which is already given by Aquinas. Different diseases may share almost identical symptoms, and so we cannot individuate the disease simply by citing its symptoms. The other reason is that it is the actual disease, and not its symptoms, that is of primary interest to human beings. If we visit the doctor with measles, we do not only want to be rid of the symptoms, we are after a cure for the infection causing those symptoms. If I understand Aquinas, he would say in such cases that the thing signified was the disease itself, but for us (ignorant) users of the language, the way it was signified (the mode of signification) was via the symptoms (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: I, q. 13a. 6).

But how does this apply to language about God? Although the example just given serves to introduce the idea of semantic externalism, the case of divine perfections looks at first sight very different from it. To understand this, we need first to consider another case: the case of geometrical terms such as 'straight' or 'right-angled'. These terms have both an everyday use, say by carpenters, and also a use by geometers. But these are quite distinct uses: there are things we can

say about the carpenter's straight line that it makes no sense to say of the geometer's and *vice versa* – we can say that the carpenter's line is straight enough, or that it's too thick, and of the geometer's straight lines that any two meet at exactly one point. Is it appropriate to say that the carpenter's line *resembles* the geometer's? Not in the straightforward way in which two carpenters' lines may or may not. What would be completely inappropriate to say is that the geometer's line is like the carpenter's only straighter. In this case, it is the geometer's use of these terms that is the primary use since we explain what it is for the carpenter's line to be straight by citing the standard for straightness set by the geometer. This example shows two things. First, we see here the way in which terms that have a *normative* sense typically generate an analogy of attribution, in which the primary use of the words specifies a standard and where objects are described by those words in a secondary sense if they satisfy that standard. Second, in such cases we are necessarily familiar with the carpenter's use and only by subsequent reflection do we explicitly grasp the geometer's. So although the geometer's use is linguistically primary, our first acquaintance with the word is with the secondary use, which is in that way epistemologically prior to the primary use. With that in mind, we now consider the words we use in talking about God: 'wisdom', 'mercy', 'Lord'. All of these words have an everyday (secular) use which we have all mastered as part of our standard vocabulary. But at the same time, all of these words have a normative force. In fact, it is part of their everyday use that they have such a force. But in this case, unlike the geometrical case, although a word like 'just' is a word we have all learnt, and we all have grasped that there is a standard as to what is and what is not just, that is quite compatible with our having radically defective conceptions as to what really constitutes justice. In that sense we may say that although we have mastered the use of the word, we may have misconceptions as to what it really means. The position then espoused by both Aquinas and Barth is that although natural man has mastered the use of a word such as 'just', its meaning – its primary use – is to refer to the justice of God, and that for Aquinas remains 'higher than we can know or understand' (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: Ia 13 2) and for Barth closed to us unless God chooses to reveal to us in Christ something of His justice.

Barth and Thomas Aquinas compared: a proposed focus for the current debate

We may conclude this examination of analogy by comparing the positions of Aquinas and Barth. The agreement between the two accounts is apparent and real enough. Both are agreed in espousing a version of the analogy of attribution in which God as justice itself is the standard by which all worldly justice is measured, that the primary meaning of the word 'just' is its application to God, and as a consequence both adopt a form of semantic externalism. The differences, however, run deeper. It is instructive to look at these contrasts because they indicate where the current debate over the use of analogy in theology should focus – in fact they are at the centre of the disagreements between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Progress here calls for a confrontation between the best modern interpreters of Aquinas, such as Hampus Lyttkens (1952), and the followers of Barth.

The most obvious disagreement is also the one from which all the others follow. Aquinas bases his account on a metaphysical theory of causality – the claim that every effect resembles its cause and the idea of an *analogical* cause where the cause is superior to its effect. Barth will reject such a metaphysical grounding of theology, not only because this particular metaphysics is highly dubious, but because he rejects *any* attempt to ground theology, whether in religious experience, morality, or metaphysics, outside God's self-revelation – finally and definitively in Jesus Christ.

Aquinas clearly wishes to establish his account of religious language prior to his account of revealed theology, so that we already have the context in which to interpret God's self-revelation.

For Barth, prior to and apart from God's self-disclosure, natural man lacks *any* access to the primary meanings of the words he uses and misunderstands the claims made in speaking about God unless God in His revelation reclaims the language.

Finally there is the question 'How much do we know?' Both agree that knowing how to use a word does not guarantee that you grasp its real (primary) meaning. Aquinas' thought always tends towards agnosticism – we know that God is the highest good, but what that amounts to is 'higher than we can understand or signify' (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: Ia 13, 2). Because an effect resembles its cause, we know that Solomon's wisdom is a pale reflection of the wisdom of God, but we become ever more conscious of how far it falls short of its original. For Barth, fallen humanity is closed off from any natural knowledge of God, and thus has no understanding of what the justice and power of God are really like. Hence their normal use is a kind of misuse embodying false conceptions of such concepts. Apart from revelation, we have *no* knowledge of God, but as and when God chooses to disclose Himself, it is possible to have real, if limited knowledge of God's nature.

The use to which [our words] are put is not, then, an improper or merely pictorial one, but their proper use. We use our words improperly and pictorially – as we can now say, looking back from God's revelation – when we apply them within the confines of what is appropriate to us as creatures.

(Barth 1940: 229)

Metaphor

Before looking at the proposal that the solution to the problem of religious language is to be found in metaphor, there are two preliminary clarifications that should be made.

In the first place, no one will dispute that, if it is possible to talk about God at all, it will *also* be possible to use metaphor, and that even if there are other claims made about God that are to be regarded as straightforwardly literally truth-apt, there is extensive use of metaphor, both in the Bible and in sermons, theological writings, and the everyday talk of believers. What concerns us, however, is simply the claim that we can *only* talk about God by the use of metaphor. The position we must consider is that expressed for example by Janet Martin Soskice (1985: x):

In view of the Christian's insistence that he will not or cannot transpose his concept of God into supposedly imageless speech, attacks on the meaningfulness of his metaphorical language are, in fact, attacks on any of his attempts to speak of a transcendent God.

On this conception, the metaphors we use in talking about God form a closed circle and there is no way to break out of this circle.

In the second place, some authors have a completely different intent from that which interests us in talking of religious language as metaphorical. They wish to retain a use for religious language that carries with it no commitment to a God over against the empirical world, but simply as a way of giving expression to fundamental features of human life or giving expression to a commitment to live in a certain way – namely, as if they were answerable to God for their thoughts and actions: no one will think of 'the devil makes work for idle hands' as carrying with it serious theological implications. (I have just heard someone on the radio say, 'This music is inspired by God, whether or not there is a god'.) Some of Wittgenstein's scattered remarks about Christianity seem to point in that direction. What is less clear in Wittgenstein's case than in that of many who have sought to follow him – such as D.Z. Phillips – is whether his remarks are intended as an interpretation of what believers have always meant in their use of religious

language, or merely as expressing the use of religious language that he, as an unbeliever, can continue to wish to adopt.

What concerns us in contrasting the linguistic use of analogy with a metaphorical account of religious language are those authors who have appealed to metaphor precisely because of their commitment to a transcendent God, and who see metaphor as providing the means for doing justice to the radical difference between God and all worldly phenomena, including human phenomena. I may mention here Sallie McFague (1982), Soslake (1985), and Eberhard Jüngel (1974, 1977). Of these, Soslake in particular is to be commended for a highly intelligent discussion of the phenomena of metaphor in general, and for seeking to confront the technical challenges confronting a metaphorical theology, such as that metaphor is compatible with theological realism, and that metaphors are capable of truth and falsity. However, in our present context, McFague and Jüngel are of most direct interest, since they are most explicitly concerned to do justice to the radical otherness of God, and since they both present themselves as influenced in their accounts by Barth, thus forming a foil for his appeal to analogy in his account of talking about God.

The correct analysis of metaphor is a complex and controversial business, and for our purposes I will have to rest content with an informal and intuitive characterization which is easy enough to understand once illustrated. By a 'metaphor' is meant a figurative use of language – a deliberate departure from the literal – in which we talk about *A* as if *A* were *B*. For this chapter, this will suffice when coupled with the Aristotelian claim that the most successful metaphors are those based on analogy (for some *C* and *D*, *A* is to *C* as *B* is to *D* – the proportional analogy that we have already looked at) (*Rhetoric* III, 1411a 2). It is this last idea that may have led some people, including in particular Jüngel,⁵ into thinking that there is little difference between appealing to analogy within the literal use of language that I have examined above and seeing religious language as metaphorical. However, taking my cue from Aquinas, I shall argue that in theological appeals to analogy there is a profound difference between the two cases, which makes the appeal to metaphor in particular completely misguided.

Before turning to that, I shall look at what are for me the two most significant technical challenges confronting those who wish to see all talk about God as metaphorical. I myself believe that at least the second of these challenges cannot be met, but whether or not I am right, the onus is on those who appeal to metaphor in this way to present a theory of metaphor that is adequate to meeting them.⁶

Many authors have stressed that metaphor is a *parasitic* use of language. In one way the point being made is obvious enough: we cannot make sense of the idea of a word being used metaphorically unless there is already a literal use of that word. In that way the metaphorical use of words depends on the literal use.⁷ But there is a deeper concern here. To make sense of the idea that we can only talk about God metaphorically, we have to accept the idea of a being that can be talked of metaphorically without those metaphors depending in any way upon being able to talk literally of that being, and it is far from obvious that this is possible. The problem arises if we consider an example such as Othello's description of Desdemona: 'She was false as water' (*Othello*, V, 2). Here Othello is comparing Desdemona's being fickle with water's being fluid – that is to say, comparing what is literally true of Desdemona with what is literally true of water. In the case that here concerns us when we use a metaphor about God, we are comparing God's being *X* with, say, a man's being a king, when we are not permitted to substitute anything for the '*X*'. The onus is clearly on those who advocate a metaphorical theology to offer a theory of metaphor that makes that possible.

That technical difficulty may be surmountable, but the other main difficulty is to my mind impossible to overcome. This is that, without independent access to the subject of the

metaphor, the significance of a metaphor becomes radically indeterminate. This is not just something comparable to the vagueness that pervades all language. The indeterminacy here is such that it is completely unclear what the metaphor might mean and how it is to be understood, which is indeed what one frequently experiences when told that all religious language is metaphorical. To see this indeterminacy consider an example of metaphor:

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale!

(Macbeth, III, 2)

Here, despite its subtlety and being based upon a somewhat unexpected comparison, we have a fully intelligible metaphor. ('Seeling' is the process of taming a young hawk by stitching up her eyes.) Macbeth is calling for the coming of night when murders may be committed unseen. However, this metaphor is only intelligible because we already have independent access to the concepts of night and day. Suppose that you had to introduce someone to the ideas of night and day *only* using metaphors derived from falconry, or that you asked them what Macbeth meant if he had said:

Come, seeling X,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Y;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale!

The chances that they would arrive at a correct understanding of what was meant would be negligible. 'And if the bugle gives an indistinct sound, who will get ready for battle?' (1 Cor. 14: 8). The reason is plain: any two things resemble one another in countless different ways, and so may, in appropriate contexts, be profitably compared with one another. Hence, if you do not already know what *A* is, simply being told that *A* may profitably be compared with *B* gives you no guidance as to the nature of *A*. For that reason, a metaphor that is based upon a comparison between *A* and *B* only tells us something about the nature of *A* if we already have a non-metaphorical understanding of what *A* is.

It may be objected that what I have just said depends for its force upon my having chosen a somewhat far-fetched and unnatural metaphor. The reply must be to ask, 'Are not the comparisons between God and worldly phenomena also themselves going to be "farfetched"?' In the case of both Jüngel and McFague, we are talking about authors who are resorting to metaphor so as to do justice to the radical otherness of God. After all, when we look at the parables of Jesus, He compares God to a corrupt magistrate 'who neither feared God nor regarded man' (Luke 18: 2), to a woman turning the house upside down to find a lost coin (Luke 15: 8), to a hard man who 'reaps what he did not sow' (Luke 19: 21), and to a man who cannot be bothered to get out of bed to help a friend (Luke 11: 7). Here the 'farfetchedness' of the comparisons looks to be deliberately foregrounded.

It is at this point that a contrast with the literal use of analogy becomes apparent. I stressed above the strict systematicity involved in the literal application of analogy. That implies that whether or not in a form that is accessible to us, everyday literal language fixes what the words are to mean when they are applied to God, so that the sense of theological claims can be fully determinate. Metaphor, however, is completely uncontrolled and unsystematic in its exploitation

of analogy, leaving it to the imagination of the hearer to grasp what is meant – an imagination that can only act if it has independent access to both terms of the analogy.

The theological objection to metaphorical theology

The real objection to metaphorical theology, however, is theological: far from protecting the otherness of God, using metaphor as the basis for your account of religious language inevitably leads to anthropomorphism. The reason for this lies in putting together two points already made by Aquinas. I shall look at them in turn.

Thus all names applied metaphorically to God, are applied to creatures primarily rather than to God, because when said of God they mean only likenesses to such creatures.

(Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: I, 13a 6)

Here Aquinas is contrasting the use of metaphorical language in talking about God with his own account of the literal use of analogy, where, as we have seen, he has argued that the primary use of words is their application to God.⁸ What he says is clearly correct – it is a version of what we looked at above, the idea that metaphor is a parasitic use of language. If we take any metaphor, such as the one from *Macbeth* I cited above, the words are used metaphorically in terms of their use outside the metaphor. Thus ‘seeling’ is and remains a word from falconry, even when it is night that is said to be seeling. We are being invited to view the eclipsing of day by night using the image of a falconer taming a young hawk.

[T]he creature has what belongs to God and, consequently, is rightly said to be like God. But we cannot in the same way say that God has what belongs to the creature. Neither, then, can we appropriately say that God is like a creature, just as we do not say that man is like his image, although the image is rightly said to be like him.

(Aquinas 1264/1955: I, ch.29)

Aquinas frequently stresses that ‘is an image of’ is an anti-symmetric relation. In particular, although man is created in the image of God, we are not to see God in the image of man. Seeing God in the image of man is precisely what we mean by anthropomorphism. But this is what treating all theological language as metaphorical ineluctably draws us into. We take some familiar human or in any case worldly situation and invite people to see God in terms of that situation. We are trapped in a network of human images with no independent access to any other way of thinking or talking about God. McFague protested against the patriarchal imagery – King, Lord, and Father – that is rife in the Bible and traditional theology, and urges us to replace metaphors based on God as Father with God as Mother, say. But as long as we remain in the realm of metaphorical theology that is simply replacing one human ideology by another and projecting that in its turn on to God.

The contrast with the literal use of analogy here is sharp. Whereas a metaphorical description of God as king invites us to see Him in the image of some medieval despot, here the primary use of the word ‘king’ is seen in its application to God, and the human, all too human, phenomena of kingship as at best pale imitations and at worst perverted caricatures of true kingship.

[T]here is no such analogy which can explain or reveal the original itself unless we already know something of the original, for example, of Jesus Christ. Then we may detect him also in such reflections, such mirroring.

(Barth 1962: 173)

We are now in a position to engage in a radical critique of the human phenomena of kingship, and see it for what it is – a shabby parody of the true kingship of God.

Notes

- 1 'God is completely different, and the true life completely different from the way you now imagine it.'
- 2 For clarity: a 'negative theology' should not mean that it was possible to put forward true *negative* claims about God, such as 'God is not composed of matter'. What we should say is that it is inappropriate to say of God either that He is, or that He is not, composed of matter.
- 3 It must be acknowledged that at least in Söhngen's contributions there is a serious attempt to introduce rigour and clarity into the debate.
- 4 McNerny (1961) presents Aquinas as offering a purely linguistic theory of analogy. However, Aquinas undoubtedly supports that theory by a metaphysics of analogy – the theory of the analogical cause. In White (2010: 102–3), I look further at the possibility of accepting the linguistic theory without this backing that Aquinas gave it.
- 5 Jüngel makes the crucial transition from an examination of classical accounts of the analogy of names to his own talk of talking about God as metaphorical, by giving Aristotle's authority for stating that 'Analogy is a special case of "metaphor"' (Jüngel 1977: 267). But this is a misunderstanding of Aristotle. For Aristotle, *metaphor based on analogy* is a special case of metaphor, but Aristotle pointed to a wide range of other uses of analogy that had nothing to do with its use in metaphor.
- 6 The main reason for commending Soskice's book especially is that she, unlike most of the other authors known to me who have proposed a 'metaphorical theology', does confront the difficulties involved head on, even if I am not altogether satisfied with her answers.
- 7 I develop in detail a theory of metaphor that makes clear the nature of that dependence in White (1996).
- 8 It is interesting to compare this with the position of the fourth century theologian, Ephrem of Syria. For Ephrem, there was a 'chasm' between the Creator and His creation such that almost everything said about God, including what is said in the Bible, is metaphorical. There are, however, the 'perfect names' of God ('creator', 'father', 'son', 'spirit', 'king' ...), which belong properly to God alone – only God is truly a father: He is a father eternally, but men only happen to become fathers. In the case of the perfect names, God lends them to us to describe human fathers; in the case of metaphor God borrows our names to describe Himself (see Brock 1992: Chapter 3). How do we distinguish which are the 'perfect' and which the 'imperfect' names of God? Ephrem would seem to have a quite restricted list of perfect names, whereas Barth, for example, would have a much broader category. This is an important, and urgent, theological task: how, for instance, are we to regard talk of God as suffering?

THE SCIENTIFIC INTERPRETATION OF RELIGIOUS TEXTS

David Bartholomew

Introduction and background

Scientific method requires classification and quantification. If scientific methods are to be applied to the interpretation of religious texts – or any texts for that matter – it is necessary that there should be a link between meaning and what is measured. We speak of scientific *method* because we wish to emphasise that inferential procedures are carried out according to rules of rationality. This is the great strength of the scientific approach to religious texts. It ensures that different individuals, proceeding from the same pre-suppositions, will be led to the same conclusions. This stands in marked contrast to some of the methods employed by traditional biblical scholars. It is true that there are many situations where it can be truthfully asserted that biblical scholars have reached a consensus. Indeed in some situations the evidence is so overwhelming that one does not need to be too explicit about how the conclusions were reached. Unfortunately, it is also true that there are wide divergences among scholars on such matters as the historical character and the doctrinal implications of, for example, such matters as the reported resurrection of Jesus. Scientific method is concerned not only with the numbers themselves but what is done with them. It is as important to process the numbers correctly as to create them in the first place. For this reason we need to pay particular attention to inference as well as description.

We shall identify two distinct areas where quantitative methods have been applied to biblical texts. The first is associated with what is often called *stylometrics*, which aims to learn something about the structure or authorship of texts by analysing their statistical characteristics. The second is more fundamental in the sense that it is concerned with the interpretation, in particular with the historical accuracy, of biblical texts. It is in this context that Bayes' theorem is often invoked, and we shall make a major digression, at the appropriate point, to explain what the theorem can and cannot do.

Stylometrics

It may be far from obvious how one might learn anything useful from the statistical analysis of the numerical properties of words and sentences, say. However, a very simple example will illustrate

what may be possible. The London *Times* normally prints three leading articles each day on topics of current interest. The first leader, on 15 April 2011, was about immigration and consisted of 27 sentences ranging in length from four to 41 words. The second leader, about the stock market launch of a large corporation, contained 37 sentences ranging from five to 38 words per sentence. At first sight, the two appear rather similar until we note that there were two sentences of length 38 words in the second case and the next longest sentence had only 28 words. This difference is brought out very clearly if we look at the averages. In the first leader the average sentence length is 23.15 words and in the second it is 16.30. The difference is quite striking and immediately raises the question of why this should be so. The type of subject matter was not greatly different, so the most obvious explanation is that they were written by different people, the latter of whom preferred shorter sentences. There could, of course, be other reasons but the only point we wish to make here is that the quantitative evidence of the word count requires explanation. If that explanation lies, for example, in different authorship then we would have established a link between a statistical characteristic of the text and a matter of potential substantive interest.

Scientific study, as we have already noted, is concerned not only with quantification but with what is done with the numbers at which we arrive. It is as important to process the numbers correctly as to create them in the first place. Thus we are concerned with inference. In this section we shall give two examples of how the quantification of written text poses questions about, and suggests answer to, questions of substantive interest. The first relates to the authorship of religious texts; the second to their mode of composition.

The earliest major account of the statistical approach to literary studies was by Yule (1944), but this was not immediately followed up. Another pioneering study which attracted much statistical attention was that of Mosteller and Wallace on the Federalist Papers (Mosteller and Wallace 1964). Their object was to identify the authorship of several papers whose authorship had previously been disputed. At about the same time Morton (1965) (see also Morton 1978) used a stylometric approach to the New Testament epistles attributed to St Paul; he also went on to consider the disputed authorship of the Johanne material. A somewhat broader sweep was taken by A. Kenney, whose book *A Stylometric Study of the New Testament* appeared in 1986. These are reviewed in Bartholomew (1996).

Before moving on to discuss particular examples it is necessary to specify how documents of any kind can yield quantitative measures for stylometric analysis.

Statistical characteristics of religious texts

There are many things one can measure in any text. Allowance may have to be made for the characteristics of the original language in which the text was written, of course, but for present purposes we can leave such matters on one side.

Words

Words are the basic units of any text. We may look at the statistical characteristics of the set of words which the author uses, such as the frequency distribution of their length and its various summary measures. There is also the selection of words – the author's vocabulary. When comparing two texts, we may compare the size of the vocabulary or the particular choice of word. Some authors may have a particular predilection for certain words which 'gives away' their authorship. All of these things, and many others, are included in reference to the richness of the vocabulary.

Sentences

Sentences may differ in length (i.e., the number of words) or in their structure. The number of words in a sentence is easily measured and the properties of its frequency distribution determined. The structure is more difficult to quantify but, at its most elementary, it would involve such things as word order.

Multivariate characteristics

Pieces of writing which we wish to compare will usually differ in many respects. At the most basic level it may be sufficient to compare average sentence length, say, but it will usually be desirable to make a number of comparisons simultaneously. We then move into the realm of multivariate statistics. To get the idea, consider how we might compare the 'size' of members of different races. One way would be to compare height because 'larger' people tend to be taller. Equally they also tend to be heavier so we might wish to bring weight into the comparison. Height and weight together should give a better picture of group differences. One way of looking at this would be to plot height and weight in a scatter plot with height along one axis and weight on the other. Any differences in size would then be reflected in the separation of points. If we found, for example, that the points for one group clustered together in one part of the plane and those for another elsewhere, we would have a picture of the difference in which both dimensions played a part.

In a similar way we might measure several further characteristics of size and see whether different authors (or whatever the subject of investigation might be) clustered in different parts of the plane. This would only work visually, of course, in two dimensions, but conceptually there is no reason for not using many indicators of style and 'looking' for a clustering effect. We could continue to use the geometrical terminology, and speak of points, without being able to visualize things as in two dimensions.

Richness of vocabulary

The size of an author's vocabulary and the way in which words are used can be an important indicator of the origin and structure of a text. A number of attempts to measure 'richness' have been made and these have been used in stylometrics.

A single index may be useful, but no single index can capture the subtlety of a written text, so attempts have been made to use a collection of such measures. A notable example is provided by Holmes (1992), which we use as our first example.

First example: disputed authorship of the Mormon scriptures

We shall illustrate some of the principles involved in stylometric analysis by taking a study carried out by Holmes on the Mormon scriptures (Holmes 1992). His study uses a multivariate idea, the richness of vocabulary, as the main tool for discriminating among possible authors.

Holmes used five indices, each of which captures part of what we mean by 'richness'. A particular interest was in words which are used only once in a text – known as *hapax legomena*. An author with a rich vocabulary will tend to use a great many different words and it is the rarer words which are particularly indicative of authorship. The number of such words will depend, of course, on the length of the text so the actual number has to be standardised in some way to make the index independent of text length. A second, similar, index is the number of

words which are used exactly twice – *hapax dislegomena* – as they are called. A third index which Holmes used was first introduced by Yule (1944). This index is based on the supposition that different words occur in a random fashion according to a Poisson distribution, and the index is based on the variability of the frequency distribution of the number of times each different word in the text is used. It, thus, goes beyond the first two indices by using all occurrences and not just the first two. Strictly speaking it does not require the occurrences to be distributed exactly according to the Poisson law, but, if they are, it turns out that the index does not depend on the size of the text.

His fourth and fifth indices are derived from something called the *Sichel* distribution. This specifies the proportion of times that any word type (e.g., noun, preposition, etc.) is expected to occur in a text of given length. The distribution appears to fit actual texts well and it depends on two unknown parameters. What Holmes did was to devise a method of estimating these two parameters, and it is these estimates which he used as the final two indices.

Holmes wished to compare the richness of the vocabulary for a set of texts with a view to identifying their origins. In particular he wished to compare the writings known to be by Joseph Smith, the founder, with the text of The Book of Mormon and other writings to which Joseph Smith may have contributed or even authored. The methodological question is how to compare sets of five indicators. Holmes used two methods: cluster analysis and principal components analysis. Cluster analysis, as its name suggests, aims to see whether the various writings cluster together in groups, each one of which might indicate a common authorship or, at any rate, a comparable degree of richness in the vocabulary used. Holmes also included analyses from the King James translation of the Bible, in particular, parts of Isaiah, because that had often figured in earlier discussions. The relevance of this comparison is that it is claimed that the book of Mormon was written long before the King James translation was made, and this would make it surprising if it shared a common style with the King James Bible.

The interpretation of Holmes' analysis is complex and the interested reader must consult the original paper to obtain a full account. Broadly speaking Holmes' findings do not support the understanding of the origin of Mormon writings on which Mormon doctrine depends. In particular, the findings suggest that the Book of Mormon, and other writings believed to have been given to Joseph Smith by revelation, were in fact composed by Joseph Smith himself writing in what is termed his 'prophetic mode'.

The important thing for our purposes is the status of the results obtained by cluster analysis and principal components analysis. As used in these studies, they are essentially descriptive methods. They throw into relief the differences between the various documents which may have literary significance but this must not be confused with *statistical* significance. Holmes' results do not, therefore, settle in an objective way the questions of the authorship of the Mormon texts. They do, however, make it that much more difficult to argue the contrary case.

Second example: the synoptic problem

Many biblical documents are supposed to have been composed by drawing on a variety of sources. In retrospect, it is then of interest to identify the origins of extant passages in those earlier documents. One major study of this kind was carried out on the book of Genesis by Radday *et al.* (1985). It was supposed that there were three strands running through Genesis and it was the purpose of the study to disentangle them. A more recent field of study of this kind relates to the manner of formation of the synoptic gospels.

The synoptic gospels are those attributed to Matthew, Mark, and Luke. The so-called synoptic problem arises because some of the material is common to all three gospels, some is

common to two of them and some only occurs in one. The problem is to discover why this has arisen and to explain the occurrence of the overlaps. This problem is closely linked to the dating of the gospels because, if the overlaps have occurred because one writer had access to one or more of the others, this could only happen if some had been composed before others. For example, Luke could only have used material from Mark if Mark's gospel was already available. The synoptic problem has been investigated by comparing the material which is common to pairs of gospels and making deductions about how this might have arisen.

There is an enormous literature on this problem, mainly written by biblical scholars but, more recently, attempts have been made to study the problem statistically. A useful review of this work has been made by Poirier (2008). Very recent, and sophisticated, studies in this tradition are by Mealand (2011) and Abakuks (2012).

One can imagine many ways in which the gospel writers may have operated. For example, and not very realistically perhaps, they may have worked independently, but all drawing on a common source of oral, or possibly written, material, now lost. Or Luke, for example, may have used Mark as one of his sources, drawing some of the rest of his material from elsewhere. One of the best known hypotheses of this kind, known as the two-source hypothesis, is that both Matthew and Luke drew on Mark and on another document, often known as Q. The supposed source Q is entirely hypothetical since no such document has been discovered, and Abakuks (2006) has used probability arguments to show that the assumption of its existence may not even be necessary. This uncertainty has not prevented many biblical scholars, for example Crossan (see below), from treating Q as if it really existed. It is not possible to settle the question statistically because there is only a limited amount of text available, and the best we can hope for is to shift the probability in favour of one hypothesis or the other. Mealand's analysis, using a variety of multivariate methods, moves the odds somewhat in favour of the two-source hypothesis.

The number of possible hypotheses is clearly very large, and the object of stylometric research in this field has been to find which of the possibilities are the most plausible in the light of the data. Literary scholars will judge plausibility with reference to the canons of literary criticism, whereas statisticians will proceed by constructing models of the composition process and choosing amongst them using criteria of closeness of fit. The two approaches are not necessarily in conflict, and one may hope, instead, that they will be mutually reinforcing.

All approaches must begin by specifying the units of text which will form the basis of the comparisons. This is not a straightforward matter, but it is natural to begin with words as the most elementary units of which text is composed. However, meaning is derived from context, as well as the individual words, so it is important to ensure that, if one chooses to use words as the elements of analysis, one also checks that they are being used in the same sense in the various locations in which they occur. Although these questions are of fundamental importance, they are not primarily statistical and therefore will not be pursued further.

The central idea behind any model is a specification of how the synoptic authors are presumed to have worked. It is easy to see that they did not copy directly from one another, or some other source in a purely mechanical manner, because if they had, the fact would be immediately obvious. It is evident that if only one source had been used by any one author it must have been used in a more unpredictable fashion. The best way to capture this unpredictability is by introducing probabilities into the specification of models. This does not imply, of course, that authors drew lots in deciding what to write next, merely that the unpredictability in their behaviour can be described in probability terms. In other words, they behaved *as if* they were drawing lots. The proof of this particular pudding, of course, is in the eating!

Ideas of statistical inference applied to the interpretation of texts

The methods of statistical inference have sometimes been seen as providing a tool to help in answering questions posed by Biblical texts. There are certainly some similarities between the two approaches, so before proceeding further, we outline some of these and comment on their relevance.

In a typical statistical problem there are some data, usually numerical, and one or more hypotheses to explain them. The aim is to find a hypothesis which satisfactorily explains the data. There are various procedures of inference for judging how closely the data conform to the hypothesis. The data will usually consist of a collection of numbers (often a random sample) from some population. Next there is a set of hypotheses which, it is hoped, will explain the data. The problem of statistical inference manifests itself in a variety of forms according to the objectives of the analysis. For example, one of the hypotheses may be special in some sense, and the objective will then be to test whether the data are consistent with that hypothesis. Or one may simply wish to select that hypothesis which provides the best explanation of the data – in some clearly defined sense.

In the case of biblical texts the written texts comprise the data, and the hypotheses purport to explain what the texts mean or who wrote them. In the statistical problem, as we have seen, the data usually consist of numbers derived from some measuring process. In textual analysis, the data will seldom be numerical and the position is obviously more complicated even if it is of essentially the same form. The words may be parts of narrative accounts, and they do not necessarily have a single unambiguous meaning. Or they may be poetry or other literary forms which do not have a simple factual interpretation. The task of the biblical scholar is to decide what it all means and to express the conclusions in terms of one of the hypotheses which are being entertained as possible explanations. Another, important difference is that in the scientific case the size of the sample is often at choice. If, initially, the result is unclear we can usually go back and increase the sample size. That option is rarely available in the analysis of texts because what we have may be the total corpus, or, even if it is not, what we have is hardly likely to be anything like a random sample of the corpus.

However, in spite of the obvious differences, there are certain common features and one of them is particularly relevant here. It is often true that there is more than one statistical hypothesis which accounts for the data. In such cases the hypothesis is said to be poorly determined, or underdetermined, by the data. Subsequent work may then be directed to collecting more data which will help to resolve the uncertainty. In biblical studies this situation is the norm. What is written in the gospels, for example, is held to support many different and sometimes seemingly contradictory interpretations. For example, according to one hypothesis, the texts are to be treated as recording actual events, whereas, in another, they may be understood as symbolic or as fictitious in some sense. The most that the biblical scholar can expect to do is to construct a coherent account of what he finds – that is, to find a hypothesis which can account for everything we know under certain interpretations of the data. Such interpretations often depend on hidden assumptions which it is assumed, or hoped, the reader will share with the author. A common example of this is to suppose that God (if he exists) is not involved in any way with what happens in the world. If this assumption is shared by the reader a naturalistic hypothesis such as this may appear convincing. The point being made here is not that such assumptions may be true or false but that any uncertainty about them bears on the final conclusion.

Before moving on to Bayesian methods, we shall critically examine attempts by a number of biblical scholars and philosophers to use quantitative methods in the interpretation of biblical texts. To do this we shall examine their approaches to a single, critical event reported in the

Christian gospels: namely, the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. All of them focus on the historicity of what is reported, but in this example, especially, interpretation and historicity are inextricably bound up together.

We begin with J.D. Crossan, who has published many books relevant to the subject (for example, Crossan 1991, 1994). Crossan is a leading figure in the Jesus Seminar, which classifies the purported records of the life of Jesus according to their authenticity by a process of collective decision-making which involves voting by members of the seminar. The data used by members of the seminar consist of a set of sayings gleaned from many sources of which the Gospel of Thomas and the alleged Q Sayings of Jesus figure prominently. This approach is scientific to the extent that more weight is given to multiply attested sayings (i.e., those that occur in several sources, assumed to be independent). However, little attention appears to be given to the basic authenticity of the sources. For example, there seems to be no recognition that the Q source is hypothetical and that there are some scientifically based studies (such as that of Abakuks 2006) which show that Q need not be assumed to exist in order to account for what we find in the gospels. In fact what Crossan appears to be doing, with a great show of imaginative erudition, is to construct a naturalistic hypothesis which accounts for all of the evidence. One of its most questionable elements, picked on by N.T. Wright (2003), is that Crossan introduces the idea of *retrojection*. That is, in order to account for the resurrection stories in the gospels, he supposes that the events did not really happen but were written back into the record by later Christian communities in order to justify their beliefs and practices. No evidence is given for believing that this is possible (for example, no instances are given of this having certainly happened, elsewhere). The success of Crossan's efforts must be judged by whether the reconstruction represents a possible and credible explanation. Crossan himself offers no guidance on how one should choose between possible explanations (supposing there to be more than one!). He uses no probability statements, formal or informal, to express his own judgements. There is therefore no justification for describing his method as scientific.

N.T. Wright is a major New Testament scholar who treats the resurrection in *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Wright 2003). He claims to have shown that the bodily resurrection of Jesus from the dead provides the best explanation of what we find in the biblical record. To focus on the main point we wish to make, we begin with his conclusion, which is: 'We are left with the secure historical conclusion: the tomb was empty, and various "meetings" took place not only between Jesus and his followers (including at least one initial sceptic) but also, in at least one case (that of Paul; possibly too, that of James), between Jesus and people who had not been among his followers. I regard this conclusion as coming in the same sort of category, of historical probability so high as to be virtually certain, as the death of Augustus in AD 14 or the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70' (2003: 710).

Although the final conclusion is expressed in probability terms the logic employed owes nothing to probability theory. Instead, he draws on the idea of necessary and sufficient conditions as they occur in logic and mathematics to establish the truth of a proposition. For example, he says: 'The empty tomb and the "meetings" with Jesus, when combined, present us with not only a *sufficient* condition for the rise of early Christian belief, but also, it seems, a *necessary* condition.' He adds, 'Nothing else historians have been able to come up with has the power'. Nevertheless, Wright acknowledges that this does not deliver the certainty to be expected from formal logic (because it is concerned with what the record says, rather than with what actually may have happened) by saying: 'This remains, of course, unprovable in logical or mathematical terms. The historian is never in a position to do what Pythagoras did: not content with drawing more and more right-angled triangles and demonstrating that the square on the hypotenuse always does in fact equal the sum of the squares on the other two sides, he constructed a

theorem to prove that this must always be the case, with history it is not like that. Almost nothing is ever ruled out absolutely; history, after all, is mostly the study of the unusual and unrepeatable. What we are after is high probability; and this is to be attained by examining all the possibilities, all the suggestions, and asking how well they explain the phenomena.'

Before moving on to the Bayesian approach, we shall look at a third, and different, approach.

Licona (2010), by contrast, is very clear that, ideally, Bayesian inference is appropriate in this case, and he quotes some attempts to proceed in this fashion and he discusses it on p. 116ff. However, Licona does not find the conditions applicable, so he introduces an alternative, non-probabilistic, method to find the hypothesis which provides the best explanation of the data. It is impossible to do justice to Licona's careful and thorough treatment in a short space but the essence is as follows.

Licona begins with what he regards as the irrefutable facts, which he calls the 'historical bedrock', which has to be explained by any hypothesis. These facts are universally agreed by virtually all scholars. He then considers the chief 'naturalistic' hypotheses which purport to explain these facts and then rates all these competing hypotheses according to how good an explanation they provide. He concludes that the hypothesis of actual bodily resurrection provides the best explanation.

The Achilles heel of Licona's treatment, for our purposes, lies in what he calls the 'horizons' of the authors of the various hypotheses. These, essentially, are their prior suppositions about the nature of reality. He acknowledges that agreement among historians is unobtainable because each uses a different horizon. In particular, any historian who rules out supernatural actions, *a priori*, is precluded from giving credence to the resurrection. The great merit of Licona's treatment is that it is totally transparent and makes it clear where those who disagree with him must aim their criticism.

Bayes' theorem

There are several approaches to uncertain inference, but one which has captured the imagination of many biblical researchers is the use of Bayes' theorem or, more generally, Bayesian inference. The reason for this is that it seems to provide exactly what literary (and other non-quantitative) researchers require. It appears to enable us to calculate the probability of a hypothesis. Thus, for example, if we were able to objectively calculate the probability that St Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians that bears his name, we would have a scientifically defensible measure of something which, hitherto, may seem to have depended on subjective – and fallible – human judgement. Unfortunately as we shall see, this is rarely the case and most such hopes will lead to disappointment. In order to explain why this is so, we must digress to give a necessarily technical account of what Bayes' theorem actually is.

Background

In order to avoid as much mathematics as possible, we shall state the theorem in an incomplete form that nevertheless enables us to make the essential points. For this purpose, we need, first, to explain the notation. The theorem is about probabilities, and, hence, we need to be able to designate a probability in a way which provides full information about what is involved. 'Pr' is short for 'probability'. The thing whose probability we are talking about is described in brackets after 'Pr'. Thus

Pr(it will rain tomorrow)

means ‘the probability that it will rain tomorrow’. Almost all probability statements are conditional; that is, the probability depends on something else being the case. Thus we might be interested in the probability that it will rain tomorrow given that the previous year was the wettest on record. The latter circumstance might possibly make a difference and this possibility needs to be acknowledged in determining the probability. This is done using the symbol ‘|’ as a shorthand for the word *given*. The foregoing probability might therefore be more fully written

$\text{Pr}(\text{it will rain tomorrow} \mid \text{the previous year was the wettest on record})$.

In practice we often use single symbols to replace the rather cumbersome forms of words used in the foregoing illustrations. Thus we might encounter $\text{Pr}(H|C)$ where H refers to some hypothesis of interest (such as that it will rain tomorrow) and where C refers to the conditions under which the probability has been calculated. Typically, we shall be interested in probabilities of the form

$\text{Pr}(H|E)$

where H might be the hypothesis that Paul wrote the letter to the Ephesians and E would be the relevant evidence – which would, principally, include all the relevant information provided by the so-called Pauline corpus. Bayes’ theorem now tells us that

$\text{Pr}(H|E)$ is proportional to the product $\text{Pr}(H) \times \text{Pr}(E|H)$.

The terms in this expression have names. $\text{Pr}(H)$ is called the ‘prior probability’ – because it is the probability before we consider the evidence E . $\text{Pr}(H|E)$ is called the ‘posterior probability’ of H because it is the probability after the evidence E has been taken into account. The remaining term, $\text{Pr}(E|H)$, is called the ‘likelihood’. It is important to notice that the word ‘likelihood’ is being used as a technical term in a sense which is somewhat more limited than its everyday meaning. In particular it is not a synonym for ‘probability’. The reason for this is that we shall only be interested in how it varies with H (and not how it varies with E). The context in which it is used is one in which we are comparing different hypotheses on the same data.

It is now immediately clear where one problem in the use of Bayes’ theorem lies. Bayes’ theorem is essentially about how probabilities are *changed* by evidence. In the example given above, we could only find the probability that Paul wrote Ephesians *after* the evidence is available, if we already know what the probability was *before* the evidence became available. In other words we must know the prior probability before we can determine the posterior probability. The theorem says nothing at all about how the prior probability should be determined. In most cases this is a personal matter, and there is no requirement that different people should agree. It is this essential subjectivity which has made the theorem so controversial. It must be emphasised that the theorem itself is not controversial. The theorem is the necessary consequence of a few axioms of rational choice which are quite unexceptional. The controversy resides in the *applicability* of the theorem in practice. There are some scientific contexts, in genetics, for example, where there is no problem at all. There are many others where the matter is much more questionable. Anyone who accepts the axioms must, if they are to act coherently, accept their consequences.

The Bayes factor

Bayes’ theorem is often used to compare two hypotheses, and we shall see it used in this way below. Suppose H_1 and H_2 are two competing hypotheses. We could compare their posterior

probabilities by computing the ratio $\Pr(H_1 \mid \text{evidence})/\Pr(H_2 \mid \text{evidence})$. According to Bayes' theorem this may be expressed as

$$\frac{(\Pr(H_2 \mid \text{evidence})) / (\Pr(H_1 \mid \text{evidence}))}{(\Pr(H_2)) / (\Pr(H_1))} \cdot \frac{(\Pr(\text{evidence} \mid H_2)) / (\Pr(\text{evidence} \mid H_1))}{1} =$$

The second factor $\Pr(\text{evidence} \mid H_2) / \Pr(\text{evidence} \mid H_1)$ is called the Bayes factor. If it is large, it means that H_2 gives a much higher probability to the evidence than H_1 . If the Bayes factor is very large indeed it might swamp the prior probability ratio so that, even if we do not know the latter, its actual value hardly matters. This means that progress can sometimes be made if we are very uncertain about the prior probabilities because whatever the prior probability ratio is, the Bayes factor will be 'large'.

There is a long history of using this way of bypassing the need for prior probabilities. In statistics it is known as 'likelihood inference' and it has been in use for nearly a century. But it has achieved wider currency more recently under the title of 'inference to the best explanation'. As proposed by Lipton (2004), 'best' is interpreted to mean 'that which gives what we observe the greatest probability'. Other users of the term have interpreted 'best' in other senses, as we have seen with Licona above. When used probabilistically, this mode of inference is essentially Bayesian analysis but without the prior probability.

There are three further important points to note about the application of Bayes' theorem. First, it can be used in stages to build up a posterior probability. Suppose the evidence E becomes available in two stages. After stage 1, the posterior probability is $\Pr(H \mid E_1)$, say. If further independent evidence E_2 is added, the posterior probability becomes $\Pr(H \mid E_1 \text{ and } E_2)$. It is straightforward to show that $\Pr(H \mid E_1 \text{ and } E_2)$ is proportional to $\Pr(H \mid E_1) \times \Pr(E_2 \mid H)$. In words this says that the prior probability at the second stage is the posterior probability from the first stage. So we can proceed, sequentially, to build up evidence with the prior probability at any stage being the posterior probability from the previous stage. Second, it is essentially a means by which an individual can ensure that the set of their beliefs is coherent. It does not lead to agreement among individuals unless, of course, they happen to agree on their prior probabilities and any other subjective inputs. Third, a point which is mathematically trivial but of fundamental importance in practice, if a person chooses their prior probability to be zero, no amount of evidence can produce a posterior probability of anything other than zero.

Two applications of Bayes' theorem to texts

We shall discuss two applications of Bayes' theorem – both by philosophers – to the question of whether or not there was a bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ. Taken together they illustrate the pitfalls which await the unwary.

Swinburne

We begin with Swinburne (2003). He uses an approach similar to that employed in his earlier work on the existence of God (Swinburne 1979/1991). The greater part of the book is taken up with a highly detailed and thorough, but qualitative argument. In an appendix, Swinburne clothes the qualitative argument in algebraic terms and assigns some numerical values to some of the probabilities involved. Swinburne requires, of course, a prior probability – in this case the

probability that God exists. The process of building up a posterior probability starts, according to him, with a prior probability conditional on what he calls *tautological evidence* (that is, the evidence provided by natural theology). He also speaks of intrinsic probabilities in the same sense. It is not clear why he regards this as the starting point, because natural theology is based on what nature tells us about the existence of God and this evidence is necessarily provided by the natural world. We need to go back further to the point before there is any evidence derived from the senses at all. In those circumstances, as I argued in Bartholomew (1996: 167), any prior probability is strictly indeterminate and hence there can be no truly objective posterior probability of any hypothesis about the world dependent on it. This applies to Swinburne's argument, and hence all of the probabilities which appear in his discussions must be subjective (including his prior probability for God's existence of 0.5). Swinburne recognises this fact but does not sufficiently emphasise that, as a result, all his probabilities are subjective and are relevant to no one but himself. His claim that the resurrection is highly probable expresses his own belief, systematically arrived at, but places no obligation on others to agree. It does, however, place an obligation on anyone who claims to be forming their beliefs rationally to arrive at them using Bayes' theorem.

McGrew and McGrew

The second paper is by McGrew and McGrew (2009). This is a major study set in the context of a wider discussion of Hume's famous argument about miracles. It avoids the need to specify prior probabilities by looking only at the Bayes factor. McGrew and McGrew aim to show that the Bayes factor in favour of the resurrection must be very large, so that the prior probability ratio required to outweigh it would have to be very small indeed. They conclude, using an approximation and making other assumptions, that only if the prior probability of God's existence were judged to be less than $1/10^{40}$ (a value which Licona quotes in a footnote on p. 117) would it be credible to doubt the resurrection. A probability of $1/10^{40}$ is unimaginably small – so small that it is virtually indistinguishable from zero. Hence, for all practical purposes, the resurrection, according to the McGrews, is virtually certain.

This is a very surprising result which, if truly objective, would move the subject beyond further argument. It is therefore important to examine the argument very closely. The McGrews start from the biblical evidence and explain in a section entitled 'Textual Assumptions' (p. 597) that they will assume 'that we have a substantially accurate text of the four Gospels'. Intuition would suggest that this builds in a substantial advantage at the outset to hypotheses which are consistent with that assumption (it rules out, for example, Crossan's various hypotheses). But intuition is not necessarily a sure guide. The McGrews identify many events recorded in the gospels which all testify to the reality of physical resurrection. It turns out that the relevant Bayes factor requires the determination of the probability of the conjunction of many (about 40) events. This probability cannot be determined because the events concerned are not independent. The McGrews recognise this and therefore propose an approximation which yields the same Bayes factor *as if* they were independent. Their justification for doing this is that any departures from independence would tend to make the Bayes factor even smaller and so they are erring on the safe side by treating the events as if they were independent. Their argument for doing this is unconvincing and entirely qualitative. The McGrews also devote considerable space to a defence of the general historical accuracy of the gospels without, apparently, noticing that their conclusion on that seriously compromises the validity of their Bayesian analysis. Their analysis does show how dependent conclusions may be on the assumptions made at the outset – or imported during the analysis.

Conclusions

Religious texts concern, directly or indirectly, the nature of ultimate reality. They are often used to support various contentions about the nature of that reality. We may approach these questions using one of two assumptions: either that the reality as we experience it through the senses is the totality of all that exists, or that this is not the case and there is something beyond what we experience with the senses.

The methods described in the first part of this chapter were descriptive in the sense that they enable us to see the issues more rationally and to contribute more sensibly to debates about such things as the authorship and structure of religious documents. They did not (and cannot) decide issues with certainty. Indeed their chief value may be in insisting that such things must always be uncertain to some extent.

Our discussion of inferential methods in the second part of this chapter showed that neither Bayes' theorem nor any other method of inference can lead us to certainty about the nature of ultimate reality. Any hypothesis which ultimately depends for its truth on which stance we take about the nature of ultimate reality involves a prior probability, and there is no way to rationally assign such a probability – it is essentially indeterminate. In particular, if we were to assign a probability of zero to God's existence – as some seem to do – no amount of subsequent evidence could shift us from that position. Conversely, if the reverse is true, we could, in principle at least, be convinced of the truth of any proposition for which there is sufficient evidence. However, there is no way that the beliefs derived from the two opposed starting points can ever be reconciled rationally.

Acknowledgement

In preparing this chapter I have greatly benefited from discussions with Dr Andris Abakuks.

METAPHYSICS AND RELIGION

Kevin Hart

Introduction

'Metaphysics' and 'religion' are vast, tangled concepts, and problems quickly appear when they engage one another. To begin with, not everything identified in the West as a religion has been continuously self-identified in that way. For example, Hinduism has a deep history of metaphysical speculation about Brahman, taken as the absolute, and in particular about the relations of Atman and Brahman, yet there is no word in Sanskrit that is well translated by 'religion'. When Hindus today think of their spiritual beliefs and practices as a religion, it is largely a modern notion derived from contact with Europe and North America. Ch'an Buddhism and Taoism have concerns that Western philosophers have no hesitation in calling metaphysical; however, neither religion acknowledges divinities and therefore has no curiosity in the being or essence of God or the gods, which so absorbs the attention of Western thinkers. If we restrict ourselves to the Abrahamic faiths, we find that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam pose questions about essence and existence, form and matter, the nature of the divine being, cause and effect, the necessary and the contingent, the one and the many, and other traditional topics of metaphysics. Yet Judaism, Christianity, and Islam may name cultures, not just religions, from which metaphysics arises; the philosophers themselves might not be believers or might be regarded as unorthodox.

In the same spirit, one should add that the word 'metaphysics' means different things in different contexts. We talk of 'classical metaphysics', by which we refer to a range of problems discussed chiefly in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, problems whose stems are the Forms, Being, and the One. And we also speak of 'modern metaphysics', by which we refer to the subject as elaborated since Descartes; and here there are new issues that come to the fore, including human and divine freedom, the relation of mind and body, other possible worlds, and the nature of space and time. Even in modern metaphysics there are important divisions, especially once analytical philosophy gains confidence and energy. Speculative metaphysics gives way to descriptive approaches (see Strawson 1964: 9–10), as well as, more recently, to the modal metaphysics of David Lewis. And on the continent one speaks in another way (and sometimes in a critical tone) about the subject, of metaphysics as onto-theo-logy (Heidegger) and as the metaphysics of presence (Derrida). So, looking broadly at historical instances where religion and metaphysics cross one another, we shall find some philosophers applauding the speculative metaphysics of a religious system; others using a chastened analytical metaphysics to make clear

and exact, yet comparatively modest, claims about the deity; and yet others exploring middle positions. Medieval philosophers have recourse to classical metaphysics and Arabic commentaries on it, while modern philosophers draw on both classical and modern metaphysics. Metaphysics and religion: a tangle indeed.

Interest in metaphysics among the Abrahamic faiths is uneven at best, with regard to both style and understanding of what 'metaphysics' means. In Judaism, we find Philo of Alexandria (20 BCE–50 CE), whose allegorical readings of Scripture identify then mine rich metaphysical veins in Torah. If the Talmud does not seem to address in a philosophical manner standard metaphysical issues to do with being, identity, and cause and effect, deep study of both the *aggadah* and the *halakah* can generate intense discussions about metaphysical theses. Kabbalah makes all manner of assumptions and proposals we are likely to call metaphysical, but is not concerned with argumentation. We are closer to metaphysics as usually conceived in the West with Maimonides who, in his *Guide for the Perplexed* (1190), proposes proofs for the existence, incorporeality, and unity of God, and we are fully there in *The Ethics* (1677) where Spinoza, after earlier developing a critique of revelation, sidesteps all biblical witness and produces a sophisticated philosophy of substance, attributes and modes (see Spinoza 1994: 10–23, 85–265). This step away from traditional belief in order to do metaphysics is not uncommon in Judaism. There are of course distinguished metaphysicians who are also Jews – Moses Mendelssohn (1729–86), for one – but more often than not their metaphysics is disconnected from religious beliefs, and is very seldom used to bolster such beliefs or to universalize them. With Emmanuel Lévinas (1906–95) we have a Jewish philosopher who writes Talmudic commentaries as well as essays and treatises on ethics. 'Metaphysics', for him, denotes the face-to-face relation; it is a unique sense of the word, and one that generates a powerful work of ethics in which God – presumably a non-realist understanding of God – 'comes to mind' in moving towards the other person (see Lévinas 1969: 84; 1998: xi–xv).

In Islam, metaphysics flourishes after the translation of Aristotle's treatises into Arabic in the ninth century. One early sign of sophistication is the engagement with Greek philosophy undertaken by al-Kindī (801–73); another, surer sign is the reflections on the first cause by al-Fārābī (872–950). In the so-called 'Golden Age' of Islamic thought (eighth to twelfth centuries) we find two threads of inquiry: *Kalām*, which seeks to determine theological principles through dialectic, and *Falsafa*, philosophizing that draws from Aristotle and the Neo-Platonists. Ibn Sīnā or, in Latin, Avicenna (c. 980–1037) and Ibn Rushd or, in Latin, Averroes (1126–98) tie together both threads in their own ways, each producing a rich and subtle system informed by Aristotle. Ibn Sīnā's *The Metaphysics of 'The Healing'* is a towering work, and it is worth noting that he is clear, right at the start, that the existence of God 'cannot be admitted as the subject matter of this science [i.e., metaphysics]' (Avicenna 2005: 3). Metaphysics for him does not simply subsume religion. Yet philosophy was seen to be in competition with revealed truth by some of the faithful. Abū Hāmid Ghāzālī (c. 1055–1111) wrote a treatise called *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, sharply questioning several teachings derived from Aristotle: that the world is eternal, that God knows particulars only in a universal manner, and that only the soul can be immortal. The work prompted Ibn Rushd to compose a riposte, his *Incoherence of the Incoherence*. Other schools of metaphysics followed, all braided with Islam: in the twelfth century we find Shihāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī (1154–91) turning from Aristotle to the Neo-Platonists in his powerful *The Philosophy of Illumination*, and in the seventeenth century there is Mullā Sadrā (c. 1571–1636), who broke with Suhrawardī on the key topic of 'beings of reason' and developed instead a metaphysics of acts of being.

Metaphysics abounds also in Christianity, even if it is curbed, suspended, or rejected by some philosophers and theologians. Medieval Christianity and Islam share a heritage in Aristotle and Neo-Platonism, and three philosophers stand out in this period of Christianity: Thomas Aquinas

(1225–74), John Duns Scotus (c. 1265–1308) and William of Ockham (c. 1287–1347). It should be acknowledged that some Christian thinkers – William of Auvergne (c. 1180/90–1249), Albert the Great (1193/1206–80) and Aquinas, among others – were in close conversation with Islamic philosophy, relying on works such as Ibn Sīnā’s *Metaphysics* and *On the Soul*. They were read in Latin translation half a century before Aristotle became more fully available in the West. Until then, scholars were restricted to only a few texts of The Peripatetic, including the *Posterior Analytics* and the *Topics* (see Goichon 1969: Chapter 3). Nor did Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* enter discussion all at once: books *mu* and *nu* were rendered into Latin only in the 1270s. As early as his *On Being and Essence*, though, Aquinas refers extensively to Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd (‘the Commentator’). That metaphysics has been used to clarify Christian beliefs as well as to render them more credible is a constant theme in modern times: at one end of the spectrum we find G.W.F. Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1816; see Hegel 1969: 50), which boldly claims to present God’s thought before Creation, and at the other end Richard Swinburne’s analytical case for rational belief in God, *The Existence of God* (2004). In order to avoid undue generality, I shall concentrate on Christianity and metaphysics, while making occasional references to Judaism and Islam.

There are several main positions adopted with respect to metaphysics in Christianity. First, there is metaphysics in the service of natural theology, whether in scholasticism or in contemporary analytic philosophy. Second, there are attempts to criticize or bracket metaphysics in theologies, and this takes several forms: apophatic theologies, in which metaphysical propositions about the deity are progressively unsaid; medieval contemplative theologies that prize *affectus* over *intellectus*; Pascal’s affirmation of the ‘third order’ of charity that exceeds all philosophical approaches to the deity; Kant’s attempt to bring religion within the limits of bare reason; and evangelical theologies, such as those of Albrecht Ritschl and Karl Barth, that curtail metaphysical speculation in order to bring out more clearly the coming of the Kingdom or the divine command of God’s Word. And third, there is a restraining of metaphysics, understood in one or more senses, by European philosophers. Nietzsche is a founding father, yet some of his brightest children learn also from phenomenology (Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Luc Marion) and some Christian theologians appropriate their work. I shall touch on all these general positions, lingering longer with some than with others. To say anything about specific issues, such as the problem of evil in its metaphysical register (how good causes produce evil effects) or the metaphysics of human freedom with respect to God, is beyond the scope of this chapter.

Natural theology

The word ‘metaphysics’ enters Western thought in the first century of the Common Era with an editorial title given to a group of treatises by Aristotle. Metaphysics, understood as the subject that follows physics in a philosophical curriculum, is deemed by Aristotle to be ‘first philosophy’, the study of ‘being *qua* being’ (Aristotle 1933: 981b, 1003a), although we may also take the philosophical lexicon given in book delta of the *Metaphysics* as offering a vocabulary of intelligibility. We cannot speak rationally without recourse to words such as ‘many’ and ‘one’, ‘cause’ and ‘effect’, ‘substance’, and all the others that Aristotle lists there.

After the seventh century, about the time of Stephen of Alexandria, Aristotle’s works slipped out of focus in the Latin-speaking West. Along with the greater part of his canon, the *Metaphysics* was recovered only from the middle of the twelfth century when Latin translations of Arabic versions started to become available in Europe. The impact on the fledgling University of Paris was immense; the Averroistic interpretation of Aristotle, propounded by Siger of Brabant (c. 1240–c. 1280), led to fierce controversy. On this reading, Aristotle’s views of the finitude of the soul, the eternity of the world, the passivity of the will, and the existence of many

powers set between God and human beings sharply contradicted the teachings of the Church. Accordingly, the *Physics* and the *Metaphysics* were banned in 1215. It was Aquinas who harmonized the teachings of ‘the Philosopher’, as he called Aristotle, and the views of the Fathers, as gathered by Peter Lombard (c. 1096–1164) in his *Sentences*; and an important factor was his commissioning (as it seems) of William of Moerbeke (1215–86) to produce new Latin translations of the Philosopher from the original Greek so that he could deal directly with Aristotle and not through Syrian and Arabic filters of the texts. Aquinas’s grand synthesis of philosophy, doctrine, and scripture included Plato, whose dialogue *The Timaeus* had long been known in the Latin West, and a range of other classical metaphysicians, most notably Plotinus, Porphyry, and Proclus. It also drew from Ibn Sīnā, especially his radical distinction between essence and existence, and from Maimonides’s proofs for the existence of God and his discussion of the divine attributes. To draw from and to agree with are different things, however, and Aquinas tended to transform rather than adopt. Christianity provided the living context for transformation: the finite had to be placed in the frame of the infinite.

Aquinas inherits an idea of God from the Fathers and from earlier scholastics, especially Anselm (1033–1109), which generates what we call ‘perfect being’ theology. Anselm’s God in the *Proslogion* enjoys all possible perfections simply by being God: he does not need to create in order to reach his full potential. This means that God is really distinct from the cosmos, which is quite different from how Aristotle saw things. For him, the gods were the highest beings *in* the cosmos (Aristotle 1933: 1074b 1–14). The Christian God does not appear as God by virtue of creation; rather, he is unchanged by his creative act, and does not contrast with what has been formed from nothing. (Robert Sokolowski (1995: 23) calls this ‘the Christian distinction’.) God is not other than the world; if we wish to specify his mode of being we would have to do so in a more extreme sense of ‘other’. This is precisely what Aquinas does in his natural theology, which presses into use a metaphysics that begins to be formulated in *On Being and Essence* (mid-thirteenth century) and ends only with his unfinished *Treatise on Separated Substances* (1269–73). Yet most readers encounter his teachings in two major, extended works, the *Summa contra Gentiles* and the *Summa Theologiae*. One important moment in the latter work occurs in the discussion of theological language. ‘Now since God is altogether outside the order of creatures’, Aquinas says, ‘since they are ordered to him but not he to them, it is clear that being related to God is a reality in creatures, but being related to creatures is not a reality in God’ (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 1, 75).

We can best understand the force of Aquinas’s point if we follow his treatment of the distinct ways in which God and the world exist. God’s mode of being is *ipsum esse subsistens omnibus modis indeterminatum* (‘subsistent existence itself, in no way determined’) (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 166–68). So the divine being does not rely on anything else in order to be itself, which is not so with *ens creatum* (‘created being’) or, if you like, *ens commune* (‘being in general’): it depends absolutely on God in order to be at all, and must participate in the divine *esse*. Christianity extends the view of God found in the Hebrew Bible while contrasting itself to pagan notions of the deities. These pagan conceptions would make the Incarnation an absurdity, for their gods belong to the world and two natures of a similar kind cannot be in one person. The Christian God, however, is beyond the world. He belongs to no genus, being absolutely singular. And because he is not of the world, he is completely free to enter it *modus sine modo*, in a way without a way, as medieval theologians put it. We might say, then, that God’s transcendence is not in tension with his immanence. We might also say, as Aquinas does, that since God is ‘other’ in quite another sense than in which worldly phenomena can be figured as same and other, we must admit that ‘we cannot know what God is, but only what he is not’ (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74: 19). For Aquinas, as for others before him, such as Philo, we can know *that* God is but not *what* he is (Philo, *On Rewards and Punishments*, 1939: VI, 39–40).

That God exists can be demonstrated in five ways, all turning on the metaphysical procedure of tracing effects back to causes, contingencies to necessity, degrees of perfection to perfection itself; but what God is comes to mind only very partially and only on accepting divine revelation. All we have in hand are analogies for the divine being, like a number of tennis balls that we throw at the sun in the hope of hitting it, while all the time shielding our eyes from it.

In considering contemporary contributions to natural theology in analytic philosophy, I am obliged to present some remarks out of sequence. Analytic philosophy in its early days was decidedly invested in metaphysics: Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) attempted to show that the world may be adequately represented by a language whose structure is given by the logic of *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13). Yet before long, analytic philosophy, with a backward look to David Hume (1711–76), turned against metaphysics, and contested its very possibility. These things should therefore be discussed in the following section, along with Kant who, after all, also prepared the way for this turn in the eighteenth century by confining metaphysics to the reach of the transcendental analytic of the first *Critique*. Only by virtue of responding to this contestation of speculative metaphysics in the twentieth century has analytic philosophy been able to articulate its own metaphysics. A principled rejection of metaphysics was performed by Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970) in his *Philosophy and Logical Syntax* (1935) and then extended and popularized by A.J. Ayer (1910–89) in his *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936). On Ayer's estimation, there are two sorts of statements that can bear meaning. The first are analytical: they are all tautologies. (These are the truths of logic and mathematics.) And the second are synthetic: they say something about a world that may be observed in practice or in principle. (These are empirical truths, and must submit to a principle of verification.) Empirical truths are open only to weak verification at best, but unlike metaphysical statements they are meaningful. So by Ayer's reasoning, all statements about God or transcendence are nonsensical, as are all metaphysical statements. Critics readily point out that the verification principle is itself unverified and unverifiable, and so the guillotine of logical positivism gets jammed before it can be used. In later years, Ayer himself softened his position on the cognitive meaninglessness of religious beliefs.

W.V.O. Quine's undercutting of the analytic–synthetic distinction in his 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism' (1951) helped to open a new path to metaphysics within analytical philosophy. That path was taken by his student, David Lewis (1941–2001), who was followed by many others, some of whom depart from his naturalistic metaphysics and express interest in the metaphysics of religious beliefs, especially in Christianity. Peter van Inwagen (*b.* 1942), for example, formulates not only an impressively clear account of analytical metaphysics but also contributes to discussions of the problem of evil, the resurrection of the dead, and other topics in the philosophy of religion (see van Inwagen 1998a, 2002, 2006). Stephen T. Davis (*b.* 1940), for another, proposes a unified argument, in the analytical style, for the rationality of Christian orthodoxy as a whole (see Davis 2006). Carnap and Ayer would be very surprised to read an essay such as Michael Rea's 'The Metaphysics of Original Sin' (see Rea 2007). It might seem to them as though analytical philosophy had gone down the wrong track. Of course, for Christian philosophers it has finally got on the right track, and even non-believers applaud regaining the ground of metaphysics, even if it is modal metaphysics, since it allows philosophy to be conducted once again in something like the grand style.

Some criticisms, rejections, and alternatives

Let us return to Aquinas. One might say that he elaborates an apophatic theology that works in concert with a natural theology. In doing so, I refer to the *theologia mystica* of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (late fifth to early sixth century CE), in which there is a progressive denial of what is predicated of the deity on the ground that the predication suits finite phenomena and not a

singular, infinite deity. Aquinas cites Pseudo-Dionysius very frequently, in part because of his presumed apostolic authority as a companion of Paul (see Acts 17: 34) and in part because of the brilliance of his theology. Yet in presenting apophatic theology we must be careful to distinguish epistemic, semantic, and metaphysical issues (see Buijs 1988). Concerns about whether anything about God can be known by human beings are epistemic. Whether theological language makes sense – ‘God transcends all human knowledge’, for example – is properly a semantic issue. What interests us here is principally the metaphysical point, namely, that God’s mode of being (*ipsum esse subsistens*) is qualitatively different from any other mode (*ens commune*).

Modern admirers of apophatic theologies sometimes see them as critical of metaphysical descriptions of God because they seek to tell us things about God that, strictly speaking, cannot be told and could not even make sense if they were told. One might see Maimonides as an apophatic theologian who restricts metaphysics: he allows some affirmative predicates of God to be valid, yet only predicates of action, not being (see Buijs 1988: 731). By contrast, Aquinas is an apophatic theologian in the metaphysical sense in what he says of God’s absolutely singular mode of existence, and he is unlike others in his epistemology and semantics. He certainly holds that theological language can make sense; it is the very first thing he discusses in the *Summa Theologiae*. Unlike Maimonides, he does not deny all predicates that are traditionally ascribed to the divine being; instead, he maintains that we can have positive knowledge of some things about God (that he is essentially form, for instance). Nonetheless, he agrees with Pseudo-Dionysius that ‘words are better denied of God’ and then, characteristically, makes a clarifying distinction: ‘what they signify does not belong to God in the way that they signify it, but in a higher way’ (Aquinas (1265–74/1964–74: 1, 59). So Aquinas holds an apophatic theology in tandem with a natural or metaphysical theology, and he does so without diminishing the mystery of God. The deity is mysterious precisely because of his singular mode of being, and because this mode of being does not contrast with our own. God exists in an entirely different way than we do. His creation is utterly gratuitous, as is his love for it.

If we take metaphysics (in a classical sense) to be a mode of reasoning about the first cause, the one and the many, and all the rest of its standard topics, then it might be said that the Christian does not need to be guided by metaphysics at all. Today we associate the view with Blaise Pascal (1623–62), who is well known for the distinction drawn in his ‘Memorial’ between the ‘God of Abraham, God of Isaac, God of Jacob’ who is not the God ‘of philosophers and scholars’ (Pascal 2005: 742). In accepting Pascal’s distinction we recoil from natural theology. In doing so, however, we jettison a good deal of material that contributes to Christian theology and that can illuminate divinity, and at the same time we do away with the basis of much biblical hermeneutics from Philo to Paul Ricœur (1913–2005). Even Pascal acknowledged in another fragment that there is no single path to God: ‘We know the truth, not only through reason, but also through the heart’ (Pascal 2005: 142/110). Less bold than the ‘Memorial’, yet more plausible, is Pascal’s division of the three orders or realms of knowledge, each of which commands its own epistemology: body, mind, and charity. The ‘third order’ is charity; it is blithely unconcerned with philosophy; it has its own logic, which is different from and altogether higher than the order of concepts (Pascal 2005: 142/110, 339/308, 680/423).

Not dissimilar, though less generally known, is an earlier view, that metaphysics is not mistaken in itself, it is simply unhelpful in the ascent to God in unknowing (where unknowing is coded by way of *dilectio* [love] or *affectio* [affection], by seraphic rather than cherubinic contemplation). Such was the view explored by the Victorines, beginning with Hugh (c. 1096–1141), in his commentary on Pseudo-Dionysius’s treatise on the angelic hierarchy, without of course using the word ‘metaphysics’, which did not appear in the contemplative writings of the day. The Carthusian monk Hugh of Balma (d. 1305) adopts this position. His *The Roads to Zion* is

embedded in a controversy as to the primacy of *intellectus* and *affectus* in contemplation, which we may take to prize, respectively, metaphysical considerations, on the one hand, and human yearning for God, on the other. The controversy has roots in Augustine, though inevitably the terms are somewhat different: 'It is true that without some understanding no one can believe in God; but the faith whereby we begin to believe in him has a healing effect, so that we come to understand more. There are some things that we do not believe unless we understand, and others that we do not understand unless we believe' (Augustine 2003: 426).

More narrowly, as already hinted, the medieval debate turns on different readings of Pseudo-Dionysius. In their commentaries on the Areopagite, Albert the Great and Aquinas affirm *intellectus* as prized in the ascent to God; and a third Dominican, Meister Eckhart (1260–1328), teaches the eternal birth of the Word in the intellect. Jean Gerson (1363–1429) argues for the importance of *affectus* in beginning and continuing the spiritual life; penitence rather than intellectual inquiry is what helps the soul begin to approach God (see Gerson 1998: 133). And yet, he thought with the high scholastics that it is the intelligence that finally allows one to contemplate the deity. Guigo de Ponte (*d.* 1136), Thomas Gallus (*c.* 1200–1246), Heinrich of Langenstein (*c.* 1325–97), and Hugh himself precede Gerson in valuing *affectus*, while Vincent of Aggsbach (*c.* 1389–1464) and Nicholas Kempf (*c.* 1415–97) follow Gerson in this regard and distance themselves from his final emphasis on the intellect. Psalm 38: 4 is a traditional touchstone for their view: we taste the goodness of the Lord before we see it, and we recall that seeing God is forbidden (see Exodus 33: 20). (For the tradition of experiencing God through the spiritual senses, see Gavriluk and Coakley 2012.) The primacy of *intellectus* or *affectus* is a 'difficult question' Hugh concedes, and going through the cases for each option, he decides on balance that 'The soul who truly loves is able to surge up to God through an *affectus* set afire by love's yearning, without any cogitation leading the way' (Hugh of Balma 1997: 170).

We pass into another world when we read Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), for the main thrust of his critical philosophy is to place epistemology front and center and to leave speculative metaphysics to languish in the background. Or, more accurately, his intention is to distinguish the metaphysics that depends on transcendental illusion, and which must be rejected, from the metaphysics that should be cultivated, namely, that which turns on synthetic *a priori* knowledge. The trouble is that Christian hope has traditionally relied on transcendental illusions. It must be put on firmer ground, Kant thinks, and now is the time to do so; for there is a break in the philosophical tradition, one that he has made by himself. Rather than the human mind seeking to adjust itself to truths evident in the world, as the medieval philosophers and theologians thought, it is the world that must accommodate itself to our understanding. Such is Kant's 'Copernican revolution' in philosophy. It is not primarily against the medieval thinkers that Kant directs his critique of transcendental illusion. His immediate argument is with both of the main camps of philosophy in his day. Influenced by Christian Wolff (1679–1754), Kant took issue with the rationalism he inherited from Leibniz and, in particular, for thinking that metaphysical truths can be validly deduced simply from concepts; and, despite his admiration for elements of Hume's thought, he also tackles the British empiricists (Locke, Berkeley, Hume), maintaining that they presuppose what they reject: the ability to make coherent judgments about objects in the world. Yet he also marks a break with medieval metaphysics, especially by virtue of his powerful attack on God as a possible object of theoretical knowledge.

The *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781: A; 1787: B) poses the primary question 'What can we know?' (A805/B833). The answer, Kant says, is only the truths of mathematics and the natural sciences. All our knowledge comes from legislation in the categories of the understanding, not in the realm of reason; and consequently all speculative metaphysics, including proofs for the existence of God and anything to do with the supersensible, does not yield any theoretical

knowledge at all. So Kant rejects *metaphysica generalis* (or ontology). In a much-cited remark he says, '[T]he proud name of an Ontology that presumptuously claims to supply, in systematic doctrinal form, synthetic *a priori* knowledge of things in general ... must ... give place to the modest title of a mere Analytic of pure understanding' (Kant 1965: A247/B303). He also rejects *metaphysica specialis* (the study of the soul, the world, and God). For metaphysicians inveterately seek to deduce knowledge just from concepts, and this is impossible, for 'Thoughts without content are empty' (Kant 1965: A51/B75). Yet Kant argues tenaciously that practical reasoning can justify belief in God. Not all our beliefs, however: they are to be stripped down to a minimum in a rational religion that is centered on the moral law rather than a metaphysics that grounds rational theology. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) offers a searching critique of revelation in the light of practical reasoning.

Albrecht Ritschl (1822–89) followed the Kantian lead in prizing ethics over doctrine; it is the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus, and not speculation about Jesus's ontological relation with God, that is important in Christianity. His essay 'Theology and Metaphysics' (1881) is a reaction to Hegelian speculative metaphysics and its adoption in theology. If he frees himself from the great Berlin philosopher, he also seeks liberation from the equally great Berlin theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834), whose teaching of a feeling of absolute reliance on God appears overly subjective to Ritschl. It is in humility and faith that we accept forgiveness from God, and it is in the cultivation of individual virtue and the following of one's place in life that one helps to bring on the Kingdom: such is the burden of *The Christian Doctrine of Justification and Reconciliation* (1870–74). The bourgeois hope of this liberal theology collapsed under the devastation unleashed by World War One, and no one marked its failure more surely and more severely than Karl Barth (1886–1968). Barth rebounds from Ritschl's theology, finding more to admire in Schleiermacher, from whom he also distances himself; and yet he too wishes to curtail metaphysics in his theology. While he finds Ritschl's 'distinction from all ancient and modern theoretical metaphysics' impressive, he notes with alarm that the theologian adds that, 'God is the power "in and over the world" which man reverences, because it maintains his spiritual self-feeling against the restraints that arise from nature' (see Barth 1957: 270). Ritschl's non-metaphysical theology retreats to a theological liberalism that Barth rejects.

Barth seldom engages in polemic against metaphysics in his *Church Dogmatics* (1932–67), yet when the topic comes up, he is clear that Christian theology must not allow itself to be compromised by adherence to any prior philosophical structure. He has no time for the 'heaven-storming Idealism' of the early nineteenth century, since that sort of metaphysics seeks 'to understand God's revelation and presence as the last and highest result of man's concern with himself and finally to introduce it as an affirmation' (Barth 1957: 73). 'God is *God*', Barth declared in his early 'The Strange New World within the Bible' (1916): the deity is altogether other than human beings who must be thought in relation to God and not vice versa (see Barth 1978: 48). Even though Barth does not speak in this way in his mature writings, he insists that God is to be grasped in and through his triune revelation, and not by way of metaphysical structures (see Stanley 2010: Chapter 3). This does not mean that Barth eschews a metaphysical vocabulary. As I suggested at the start of this chapter, it would be impossible to set aside Aristotle's lexicon in book delta of the *Metaphysics*. In fact, as Barth cheerfully concedes, he Hegelianizes throughout the *Church Dogmatics* and talks of 'being' very freely (see Busch 1976: 380).

Phenomenology and deconstruction

Philosophers have three main questions to ask: What? Why? and How? It might be said that in seeking to answer either of the first two they are led into metaphysics, at least in a broad sense of

the word, for the questions prompt one to seek a general understanding of things as they are. The third question comes to the fore in phenomenology, the school of philosophy founded by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938). In phenomenology we seek to see how we constitute as meaningful the phenomena that give themselves to us. We do so by bracketing the natural attitude (roughly, scientific explanation) and then performing a reduction that takes us back to the transcendental aspect of consciousness. We recognize that phenomena are not simply ‘out there’ (the world) or ‘in here’ (the mind) but lodge themselves on our intentional horizons; and once this has been acknowledged we can unpack their full intentional significance. Another way of putting this is that phenomenology seeks to return all transcendent objects to the immanence of consciousness. Husserl is clear that divine transcendence escapes phenomenological inspection. And yet he speculated on God as the ‘absolute monad’ or ‘all-consciousness’ and believed that the deity was the ultimate concern of the phenomenologist (see Husserl 2006: 177–78; Cairns 1976: 47; Housset 2010). Indeed, Husserl’s work was not restricted to phenomenology; it is often apparent that he posed the question ‘What?’ and so found himself engaged in metaphysics. Some of his followers, most notably Roman Ingarden (1893–1970) and Hedwig Conrad-Martius (1888–1966), believed that with *Ideas I* (1913) Husserl had taken a regrettable turn towards idealism. One task of contemporary phenomenologists, especially those interested in religion, has been to separate Husserl’s phenomenology from his metaphysics.

Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) took Husserl’s teaching in a new direction. In the 1920s he sought to elaborate a phenomenology of religious life, showing how Paul’s epistles uncover the ‘how’ of radical Christian life (see Heidegger 2004). If continued in the same vein, this phenomenology of Scripture might have developed an account of Christianity without metaphysics, that is, without asking the questions ‘What?’ and ‘Why?’ Yet Heidegger himself changed directions, letting Christianity fade from his view and diagnosing metaphysics as having a particular structure. (Other phenomenologists, including Max Scheler (1874–1928), continued in the phenomenology of religion. See Altmann 1991.) This structure can be approached in two ways. First, Heidegger holds that our forgetting of being produces metaphysics; while we continue to think of beings we no longer think of being. This is the onto-ontological distinction, and it is important to realize that Heidegger, indebted to Aristotle here, conceives being as finite, not infinite. The second way of construing this structure is as constituted by onto-theo-logy or, more accurately, onto-theio-logy. ‘The essential constitution of metaphysics’, Heidegger says, ‘is based on the unity of beings as such in the universal and that which is highest’, that is, the generality of ὄντος [*ontos*] and the elevation of the θεῖον [*theion*]. Metaphysics is therefore that discourse which gathers together all beings and refers them to the highest ground (Heidegger 2002: 61). The Greek word here, taken from Aristotle, is θεῖον and not ὁ θεός, which we find in the New Testament. Metaphysics has an onto-theio-logical structure because of the nature of philosophy, not because of a convergence of Greek philosophy and Christian dogma. Heidegger finds metaphysics in this sense, and in a number of variations, in philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche. Husserl succumbs to it when he becomes committed to transcendental idealism, and Heidegger is the first to identify it, to signal that it is to be overcome, and then to admit that it must be left to complete itself in its own way and in its own time.

The onto-ontological distinction is of little help in understanding the Christian revelation, for the Christian God is taken to be infinite, while ‘being’ for Heidegger is finite. Heidegger tells us that no theology should properly include the word ‘being’, yet that is because he thinks of theology as a response to human faith in God and not to the primacy of God’s mode of being, as happens in perfect-being theology (see Kearney and O’Leary 2009: 365–68). If we think it necessary to contemplate divine being, ineffable though it may be, we would do better

to turn from Heidegger's distinction between being and beings to Aquinas's distinction between *ipsum esse subsistens* and *ens commune*. Heidegger would tell us that Aquinas's distinction is metaphysical, that the *ipsum esse subsistens* is at once the highest ground of being and being at its most general; and yet, as we have seen, the *ipsum esse subsistens* transcends the worldly categories of same and other and does not contrast with them. All beings are given freely and out of love. To be sure, they rely ontologically on God, but not on God conceived simply in metaphysical terms as *deus ens supremum* [God the highest being]. Simply: I draw attention to the adverb I just used in order to remind ourselves that Aquinas is committed to an apophatic theology in a metaphysical sense. God is absolutely singular in his mode of being. He is infinite in the metaphysical, though not in any mathematical, sense. The metaphysics to which a Thomist is minimally committed seems not to converge with the one that Heidegger detects in Western thought, and if there is something untoward in that metaphysics it needs to be shown that there is also something unacceptable in the notion of *ipsum esse subsistens*. One might say with A.W. Moore that there is a distinction between 'bad metaphysics' and 'good metaphysics', and a Thomist would say with reason that Aquinas promotes a good metaphysics (see Moore 2012: Chapter 5).

In *Being and Time* (1927) Heidegger sought the *Destruktion* of metaphysics, by which he meant the careful de-structuring of the edifice in order to reveal its animating concerns. Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) twinned *Destruktion* with Husserl's notion of de-sedimenting, while also learning from Nietzsche's *Twilight of the Idols* (1895) that philosophy is the history of an error (see Nietzsche 1968: 40–41). Throughout his life, Derrida tirelessly experimented with a plural, deviant mode of phenomenology that came to be known as 'deconstruction'. It denies the central, organizing role that Husserl grants to pure phenomenological life and insists on the original imbrication of life and death, presence and absence. Derrida subsequently seeks to expose the 'metaphysics of presence' in several early works, most notably in *Edmund Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry': An Introduction* (1978) and *Speech and Phenomena* (1973). Derrida observes in his *Introduction* that Husserl's 'all-consciousness' plays an important role in his work; it is 'an infinite Telos that Husserl will not hesitate to call God in his last unpublished writings' and that this 'absolute Logos' is placed 'beyond transcendental subjectivity' as a teleological pole (Derrida 1978: 45 n, 146, 147). Husserl's God is therefore transcendental, not transcendent, merely 'the final fulfillment situated at the infinite, the name for the horizon of horizons, and the *Entelechy* of transcendental historicity itself' (Derrida 1978: 148). In the years that followed his first writings, Derrida argued that the very idea of God belongs to the metaphysics of presence, since the deity is nothing other than pure self-presence. Apophatic theologies are no help, he thought, in establishing a non-metaphysical theology; they only evoke a deity who is beyond being yet in a super-essential way (see Derrida 2007: Volume 2, Chapter 9). Yet Derrida responds more to philosophical framings of the Christian God than to testimonies of him, especially those in the New Testament (see Hart 2000). As already noted with regard to Heidegger, Ὁθεὸς does not necessarily converge with θεῖον.

Towards the end of his writing life, Derrida meditated on what he dubbed 'religion without religion'. In *The Gift of Death* (2008) he ventures the idea of a tradition 'that consists in proposing a non-dogmatic doublet, a philosophical and metaphysical doublet, in any case a *thinking* that "repeats" the *possibility* of religion without religion' (Derrida 2008: 50). This tradition includes Kant, Hegel, and Kierkegaard and, more recently, Heidegger, Lévinas, Ricœur, and Marion. What is 'religion without religion'? In brief, it is the thinking of religion without recourse to a revelatory event in history and the dogmas associated with such events: all that is required of the religion is the eidetic possibility of the event and not the event itself. Christianity, for instance, could be approached as a way of thinking, especially moral thinking, though one that does not commit one to the propositions of the Nicene Creed or to later

dogmas, such as the Immaculate Conception of Mary. Yet what such a dogma would be ‘without religion’ is not immediately clear. What is peculiar is that Derrida seems to be affirming ‘religion without religion’, which he notes is metaphysical, when his entire thought has been directed against metaphysics wherever it may be found.

One reason why Derrida includes Jean-Luc Marion (*b.* 1946) in his tradition of ‘religion without religion’ is that he is the author of *Dieu sans l’être* (1982), which is translated as *God without Being* but which also has another sense, ‘God without being God’ (that is, the God of the philosophers). In some ways Marion extends phenomenology, as we shall see, yet it is important also to realize that in other ways he keeps faith with Pascal. In no way does Marion deny that God exists; however, he seeks to rethink how we approach God. We must do so outside all idolatry. Even Heidegger commits conceptual idolatry. He may not think God as the *ens summum*, according to metaphysics regarded as onto-theio-logy, yet he does so by thinking *Sein* (which he takes to be non-metaphysical) before God. We must practice *theology*, Marion contends, not *theology*: that is, we must begin with God, not human beings, with how God reveals himself, and not how we talk of him. So Marion writes ‘God’ as crossed out (‘G⊗d’), in the same way that Heidegger writes ‘Being’ as crossed out in order to suspend any metaphysical implications that the word may have for his readers (see Heidegger 1959: 83). Yet there is something else in play with the cross through ‘God’: Marion’s G⊗d is love, ἀγάπη [*agapē*], the one true deity who is revealed to us in and through the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth. God’s word breaks into the world, and duly Marion thinks of God giving himself, coming to us as pure gift in excess of all talk of being and beings (see Marion 1991: xxv).

In his major work so far, *Being Given* (2002), Marion provides a general account of this ‘pure gift’ by way of a theory of givenness, what Husserl calls *Gegebenheit*. It is givenness and not intentionality that is the fundamental motif of phenomenology, he argues, thereby shifting classical phenomenology from a reliance on the philosophy of mind to the phenomenon itself and, in the process, taking a decisive step away from modern metaphysics. Some phenomena are saturated with intuition, Marion argues. The Kantian categories of quantity, quality, relation, and modality are inverted: taking each in turn, events cannot be aimed at, idols dazzle us, the flesh is absolute, and icons cannot be gazed at (see Marion 2002b: §21). In effect, Marion supplies a narrative history of phenomenology; we pass from Husserl’s reduction (phenomena as present objectivities) and Heidegger’s reduction (from beings to being) to a ‘third reduction’ that allows us to receive givenness (see Marion 1998: 192–9). Divine revelation is understood by Marion to occur by way of saturation to the second degree: a phenomenon, such as the resurrected Christ, is saturated with respect to quantity, quality, relation, and modality (see Marion 2002b: §24). In this way, Marion holds, we can speak of the Christian revelation without metaphysics. We encounter effects before causes, and as long as we keep the question ‘How?’ before us, we remain in that encounter. Of course, once we let our guard drop and start asking ‘What?’ and ‘Why?’ we find ourselves once again in metaphysics. But Marion, unlike Husserl, attempts to suspend both questions.

Part V

Religion and politics

19

RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Victoria S. Harrison

Religious pluralism is one of the most vibrant topics within current philosophy of religion. This is in part due to the increasingly multi-, or poly-, cultural environment within which philosophy of religion is now practised and taught. More importantly though, it is because thinking about theories of religious pluralism requires that one engage with some of the deepest and most interesting questions lying at the heart of philosophy in general – questions about philosophical methodology and the nature of truth, logic, and language. While this chapter examines one highly influential form of religious pluralism and reviews some criticisms of that form, it seeks to go beyond a surface level discussion of the pros and cons of any particular pluralist theory in order to show where the deeper philosophical issues lie. I begin with some terminological considerations which will clarify further the focus of this chapter.

The relationship between pluralism and diversity

Pluralism is a concept whose meaning is highly context-sensitive. It is used in a startling variety of ways both within popular discourse and within different academic disciplines. Underlying this variety, two basic understandings of the relationship between diversity and pluralism can be discerned. According to one understanding of this relationship, pluralism is simply a positive attitude towards diversity, and a pluralist is one who adopts such an attitude. This stance, which I shall call ‘attitudinal pluralism’, although it might also aptly be termed ‘affective pluralism’, captures the common-sense view that a pluralist is someone who tolerates diversity; however, taken on its own, it does not do justice to the richness of meanings conveyed by the word ‘pluralism’ in ordinary discourse or to the way in which the term is currently used within philosophy of religion. According to the other understanding of the relationship between diversity and pluralism, pluralism is a higher-level theoretical response to diversity. Here I shall call this type of stance ‘methodological pluralism’. Methodological pluralism is the chief concern of this chapter.

Both attitudinal and methodological pluralism are responses to diversity; the former is primarily an emotional response, whereas the latter is a theoretical response. That diversity elicits such responses alerts us to the fact that in certain domains – especially, but by no means exclusively, the religious and the ethical – protracted failure to reach agreement about core issues on the part of those whom we might reasonably consider to be epistemic peers is often regarded as problematic and as requiring some explanation.

Disagreement

A key philosophical puzzle raised by religious diversity arises from protracted and seemingly intractable disagreement on the part of those subscribing to different religious belief systems. Adherents of different religions disagree about key issues, such as whether or not there is a God, whether or not the universe had a beginning, and whether or not humans have immortal souls. There are also major disagreements within religious traditions concerning, for example, the nature of God and our own post-mortem destiny.

Why are such disagreements among and within religious traditions thought to be so problematic? At the most basic level, if one person holds *X* and another holds *not-X*, it might seem to be a simple consequence of logic that at most one of them can be correct. Likewise, if we extend this consideration to belief systems as a whole, it might appear that if two belief systems disagree on some issue (the immortality of the soul, for example), at most one of them can be correct. As Bertrand Russell observed, '[i]t is evident as a matter of logic that, since [the great religions of the world] disagree, not more than one of them can be true' (Russell 1957: xi). This spectre of logical contradiction is often seen as the core of the philosophical problem generated by the existence of a diversity of religious belief systems holding mutually inconsistent beliefs. It would seem that, on pain of logical contradiction, at most one religious belief system can be correct. However, given the state of the available evidence, many hold that disagreement about which of these belief systems, if any, is in fact the correct one is irresolvable by rational means. As we shall see, it is this problem of apparently rational disagreement in matters of religious belief that methodological pluralism seeks to address. Clearly, adequately addressing this problem requires more than adopting pluralism in the form of a positive attitude towards diversity.

The tenacious character of religious disagreements is sometimes taken to suggest that there are no facts of the matter with reference to which these disagreements could be settled; religious belief is non-cognitive for it is not concerned with objectively accessible religious facts, as there are none. Someone taking this view may claim that religious utterances can be reinterpreted into, for example, statements about human psychology, emotions, or values. Lack of convergence in religious beliefs over time can be taken as evidence for such a judgement; although it need not be taken this way. Alternatively, in the face of protracted disagreement, one might hold the pluralist view that different religious conceptual schemata seek to make objectively true claims and do so more or less equally well, while explaining disagreement as a result of the difficulty of accessing the relevant facts. Such disagreement might be described as 'faultless', insofar as it has arisen due to the elusive nature of religious facts – the purported objects of religious beliefs – and, as such, it does not necessarily entail that any of the religious conceptual schemata are inadequate to these facts.

In a world in which people subscribing to different religious belief systems often live side-by-side, it would seem desirable to have a theory which did not entail either that all religious adherents are mistaken in their beliefs (as a non-cognitivist or a naturalist might hold), or that at most one of the religious belief systems could be substantially correct (as an exclusivist would hold). Methodological pluralism attempts to provide just such a theory, and in doing so it seeks to avoid a significant problem faced by attitudinal pluralism. When confronted with a diversity of different belief systems, each supporting apparently contradictory propositions, an attitudinal pluralist must adopt a positive attitude towards all of them while at the same time, if she is rational, holding that at best only one of the conflicting sets of belief can be true. In short the attitudinal pluralist may be accused of not taking the beliefs of others seriously by adopting a positive attitude towards all of them while assuming that most of them are in fact false. This is akin to the difficulty faced by those who argue for religious toleration when they are confronted

with the objection that one only needs to tolerate that which one does not approve (see Schmidt-Leukel 2002 and Griffiths 2001: 101–11).

Methodological pluralism allows, but does not require, pluralists to maintain a positive attitude towards diverse belief systems (it is thus compatible with attitudinal pluralism) while holding that each system might be substantially correct even in cases where different belief systems appear to hold conflicting beliefs about the same issues.

Pluralism within philosophy of religion

Philosophers of religion often take religious pluralism to be the view that the core claims of more than one religious tradition can be true, or at least justifiably believed, even though different religious traditions assert the truth of diverse, and sometimes even contradictory, claims. Theories of religious pluralism are typically proposed as alternatives to so-called exclusivist theories (on which see, for example, Plantinga 1995, 2000), which hold that the core claims of at most one religion can be true and that the claims made within other traditions are false insofar as they conflict with the true claims of the preferred religion.

Within contemporary Anglophone philosophy of religion, interest in theories of religious pluralism has been fuelled by the increasingly felt need to broaden the scope of the discipline to include ideas from a wider range of religious traditions than was usually the case in the past (see Schellenberg 2008, 2005). As we shall see below, desire to expand the scope of the discipline in this way gives rise to methodological issues which require philosophers of religion to grapple with not only religious but also philosophical diversity.

One approach to expanding the scope of the discipline is exemplified in Keith Yandell's *Philosophy of Religion: A Contemporary Introduction* (Yandell 1999). Yandell's strategy in this book is first to provide an abstract and schematic account of four religious perspectives: that of Jainism, Theravada Buddhism, Advaita Vedanta Hinduism, and what he terms Generic Philosophical Monotheism. Yandell then extracts from these perspectives a number of fundamental ontological commitments, which are used to yield the following claims (paraphrased from Yandell 1999: 34):

If Generic Philosophical Monotheism is correct, God and persons created by God must exist.

If Jainism is correct, persons that don't depend for their existence on anything must exist.

If Theravada Buddhism is correct, only transitory states exist.

If Advaita Vedanta Hinduism is correct, only qualityless Brahman exists.¹

The next step in Yandell's argument is to demonstrate that, if any one of these claims is true, then that would entail the falsity of all the other claims. The project of the rest of Yandell's book is, then, to analyse the relevant claims in detail with a view to establishing if any one of them can be justifiably held to be true, or, conversely, if any of them can be ruled out as false (or, ideally, as necessarily false on the grounds that the claim itself entails a logical contradiction – which, in Yandell's assessment, is the fate of the core ontological claim of Advaita Vedanta).²

The success of Yandell's project, and others like it, requires that at least two conditions are met. First, that the relevant claims can be formulated precisely and accurately enough to generate logical contradictions. Second, that no theory of religious pluralism can provide a coherent account of the truth of religious claims that would block the generation of the required contradictions. For example, a pluralist theory, according to which it might be possible rationally to hold both that 'persons depend on God for their existence' and that 'persons are ontologically

independent', would prevent Yandell's project from proceeding further. Hence, a key set of sub-arguments in Yandell's book concern the refutation of religious pluralism. Yandell seeks to demonstrate that religious pluralism – at least in the form which he considers – is not even possibly true because it entails a logical contradiction (see Yandell 1999: 67–79).

Later I consider some criticisms of religious pluralism advanced by Yandell and others. Before doing so, however, it is worth briefly considering whether the coherence and rational acceptability of some theory of religious pluralism would necessarily put a stop to multi-traditional philosophy of religion, as Yandell thinks that it would. Certainly, projects such as Yandell's would not fare well if some form of religious pluralism were widely accepted. But might there not be another direction that philosophy of religion could take if it were responsive to some form of methodological religious pluralism? I return to this question below.

Religious pluralism, in the methodological sense explained above, has played an increasingly prominent role in analytic philosophy of religion since the 1980s. Discussion of it has, however, tended to remain narrowly focused on just one form of pluralist theory, namely, on that form that has been proposed and developed by John Hick (1922–2012). Despite the fact that alternative forms of methodological religious pluralism have been advanced by a number of thinkers, including Joseph Runzo (1986), Robert Cummings Neville (1991), Stephen Kaplan (1992), Kenneth Rose (1996), and Victoria Harrison (2006), many seem tacitly to assume that there is just one theory of religious pluralism; and the debate then concerns whether or not this theory is to be accepted. While the time seems long overdue for more sustained consideration of alternative theories – a point to which I return later – it is undeniable that Hick's is the most well-known and influential pluralist theory within philosophy of religion to date. Hence, any overview of religious pluralism must engage in some detail with Hick's theory and its critics.

Hickean transcendental pluralism

The fullest exposition of John Hick's form of pluralism is found in his *An Interpretation of Religion* (first published in 1989, second edition 2004). I will explain the argument of this book in some detail because, as mentioned above, much of the more recent work within philosophy of religion on the topic of pluralism is a response to Hick's seminal contribution in this book, and virtually all of the current discussion about the topic still takes place within the conceptual framework articulated by Hick.³

Before introducing his version of religious pluralism, Hick provides a context for it by explaining what he characterizes as his 'religious interpretation of religion' (Hick 2004: 1). Hick sought to develop a religious interpretation of religion that would stand as a plausible rival to the various naturalistic theories of religion that seemed to be gaining ascendancy during the second half of the twentieth century. After recounting a wealth of phenomenological data about the world's major religious traditions, he proceeds to a defence of one of his key claims: that the universe is religiously ambiguous in the sense that it permits both religious and naturalistic interpretations, and that these interpretations are both consistent with different ways of experiencing the world (see McKim 2001). As he explains, this does 'not mean that it [the universe] has no definite character but that it is capable from our present human vantage point of being thought and experienced in both religious and naturalistic ways' (Hick 2004: 73). To establish this claim, Hick reviews the main arguments in favour of a religious interpretation, and while he concedes that none is decisive, he also judges naturalism's claim that theism is redundant to be unpersuasive, especially on the grounds that there are so many features of our religious, ethical, and aesthetic experience that seem to invite a response framed in terms of a religious interpretation.

The ambiguity of the universe, Hick argues, presents each one of us with a 'fundamental option' – whether to experience it in a religious or a non-religious way. The choice that we must make, according to Hick, does not concern whether to believe in a proposition ('that God exists' for instance), but instead takes place at the level of what we might call cognitive orientation (see Hick 2004: 159). What is at stake in such a choice is whether or not we will experience the world religiously or naturalistically. Moreover, because the choice is under-determined by the actual and possible evidence, Hick avers that both religious people and naturalists can be rational in basing their beliefs about the nature of the world on their own way of experiencing it (Hick 2004: 233). (Underlying this argument is what has been termed the Principle of Critical Trust, see Kwan 2003, 2012.)

The argument so far explained has addressed the disagreement between naturalists and those holding a religious perspective. With the conclusion of that argument in place, Hick then argues that there is a further level of ambiguity to take into account if we are to reach a fuller understanding of our cognitive position. This next level of ambiguity faces someone who opts against a naturalistic interpretation of the universe and chooses to experience and interpret it in a religious way. To such an individual, a series of further options present themselves in the form of different religious traditions, each offering distinctive interpretations of the universe and different possibilities of experiencing religiously within it. Moreover, in Hick's assessment, the evidence and arguments in favour of any one of these traditions over the others do not appear decisive. Religious experience seems to be capable of supporting each of the various religious options to a roughly similar degree, as does the evidence provided by other factors such as the number and quality of the saints a given tradition produces (see Hick 1991). The universe is then ambiguous in the sense that it can rationally support a number of quite different religious interpretations and ways of experiencing religiously.

Hick then deploys the observation that different religions make strikingly different and often contradictory claims about a wide range of gods, goddesses, and non-personal ultimates to introduce his pluralist hypothesis. At the heart of this hypothesis is his conviction that 'the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it' (Hick 2004: 235–36). Hick terms this postulated ultimate divine Reality 'the Real' and claims that it is this which is the 'ground' of all authentic religious phenomena and religious experience (Hick 2004: 236).

Thus Hick attempts to address the philosophical problems raised by the fact that religions have proposed for belief a very large number of different deities and have subscribed to irreconcilably different conceptions of ultimate reality, with the claim that behind this variety lies something even more ultimate, namely, the Real. This brings us to the nub of Hick's pluralist hypothesis, which is that:

[T]he great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place.

(Hick 2004: 240)

Hick explains that these 'different perceptions and conceptions' of the Real concern the Real as it is thinkable and experienceable by beings such as ourselves. In other words, they concern the gods, goddesses, and various ultimates of the religious traditions of the world. But, as we have seen, Hick postulates a further reality behind these phenomena; to distinguish this more fundamental reality from the various perceptions and conceptions of it, he calls it 'the Real *an sich*'

(the Real in itself). The Real in itself, in Hick's assessment, lies permanently beyond the range of our thought and experience (Hick presents it as a 'postulate', in a broadly Kantian sense). While each of the major post-axial religious traditions provides a way of conceiving and experiencing the Real, none is able to deliver a conception or experience of the Real *an sich* because it is impossible for finite and limited beings such as ourselves to experience or conceive the infinite and unlimited Real *an sich*. The conclusion Hick draws is that, as far as we can tell, each major religion is appropriately related to the Real *an sich* and is therefore capable of facilitating a salvific transformation on the part of its adherents.

As he readily acknowledges, Hick's distinction between the Real as it is in itself (the Real *an sich*), and the Real as it is thought of and experienced by us, is indebted to Kant's distinction between a noumenon (a thing as it is in itself) and a phenomenon (a thing as it appears to human consciousness) (see Hick 2004: 240–46). The most important idea that Hick takes from Kant is that 'the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness' (Hick 2004: 241). Hick deploys this idea within the context of religious epistemology (something which Kant did not venture to do), and it is this which enables him to formulate his key claim:

[T]he noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these divine *personae* and meta-physical *impersonae* ... are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real.

(Hick 2004: 242)

Addressing the question of the relation of human experience to the Real, Hick continues:

[T]he Real is experienced by human beings, but experienced in a manner analogous to that in which, according to Kant, we experience the world: namely by informational input from external reality being interpreted in the mind in terms of its own categorical scheme and thus coming to consciousness as meaningful phenomenal experience. All that we are entitled to say about the noumenal source of this information is that it is the reality whose influence produces, in collaboration with the human mind, the phenomenal world of our experience. This takes place through certain concepts which Kant calls the categories of the understanding.

(Hick 2004: 243)

Certain basic categories, then, as Hick proceeds to argue, have a vital role in the process of bringing either the world or the Real to consciousness. Hick proposes that in the latter case there are two such basic categories: first, the concept of the Real as a personal God, and second, that of the Real as a non-personal Absolute (see Hick 2004: 245). While neither of these two basic categories allows the Real to be thought of or experienced in itself, according to Hick, both nonetheless generate a multiplicity of ways of authentically experiencing and conceiving of the Real. Moreover, he claims that, '[e]ach of these two basic categories, God and the Absolute, is schematised or made concrete within actual religious experience as a range of particular gods or absolutes' (Hick 2004: 245). The particular forms these gods and absolutes take are shaped by the various local contexts provided by the diverse human cultures that have flourished in different times and places. It follows, argues Hick, that all talk about gods and other religious phenomena refers to the Real *as phenomenal*, in other words, to the Real as it is – or could be – thought of and

experienced by us. About the Real as it is in itself we can say nothing concrete; although we can, Hick avers, make purely formal statements about it. (Hick suggests that Anselm's formulation 'that than which nothing greater can be conceived' applies to the Real in itself, as it is a purely formal concept which does not entail any concrete characteristics (Hick 2004: 246).)

According to Hick, we cannot literally ascribe any characteristics or attributes, such as compassion or love, to the Real *an sich*; although we can do so with respect to the Real as it is thought of and experienced by us as the various religious phenomena of the world. For instance, we could literally assert that the God of Abraham was a just God but we could not literally assert this of the Real in itself. It follows that, if we are to say anything about the Real *an sich*, we must do so by deploying language mythologically. Mythical statements are principally evocative, in Hick's view. A myth succeeds if it 'evokes an appropriate dispositional attitude to its subject-matter' (Hick 2004: 248). A true myth, in Hick's understanding, is not a literally true statement, but it nonetheless 'rightly relates us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms' and evokes 'in us attitudes and modes of behaviour which are appropriate to our situation in relation to the Real' (Hick 2004: 248). Hick further explains:

According to the pluralistic hypothesis we can make true and false literal and analogical statements about our own image of the Ultimate, truth or falsity here being determined internally by the norms of our tradition. But statements about the Real in itself have mythological, not literal, value. A statement about X is mythologically true if it is not literally true but nevertheless tends to evoke an appropriate dispositional attitude to X. Mythological truth is thus a kind of practical or pragmatic as distinguished from theoretical truth.

(Hick 2004: xxxiv)

Hick employs this distinction between practical and theoretical truth to support his claim that certain statements can be literally true of images of the divine (what he calls the divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae* of the Real), while being non-literally but mythologically true of the Real in itself. According to Hick, the fact that religions hold different beliefs does not entail, as it does for an exclusivist, that at most only one of them can be substantially correct. This is because at the literal level different religions describe different phenomena and hence do not contradict one another, and at the mythological level there is no contradiction because, not being literally true or false, myths are just not the sort of things that can be in contradiction.

The notion of the Real *an sich* is clearly of pivotal importance to Hickean pluralism. Not surprisingly, criticism of Hick's theory has tended to target precisely this notion, as we shall now see.

Key criticisms of Hickean pluralism

Critics have focused on Hick's claim that our statements cannot refer to the Real *an sich* literally and on his view that any language which we employ to talk about the Real *an sich* can only be metaphorically true if it is true at all (for instance, Byrne 1982 and Netland 1991). As we have seen, Hick endorses what we might call a strong ineffability claim: the Real *an sich* is in principle beyond description in either positive or negative terms. Some of Hick's critics (for example, Rowe 1999, Yandell 1999, and Plantinga 2000) have argued that in cases in which mutually contradictory qualities are at stake, such as X and not-X, if we deny that the Real *an sich* possesses X, we are logically committed to asserting that 'not-X' applies to it literally. Plantinga illustrates this criticism with the following example:

If Hick means that none of our terms applies literally to the Real, then it isn't possible to make sense of what he says. I take it that the term 'tricycle' does not apply to the Real; the Real is not a tricycle. But if the Real is not a tricycle, then, 'is not a tricycle' applies literally to it; it is a non-tricycle. It could hardly be neither a tricycle nor a non-tricycle, nor do I think that Hick would want to suggest that it could.

(Plantinga 2000: 45)

Hick's response to such critics is to assert that he does indeed wish to deny that concepts such as tricycle either apply or fail to apply to the Real; this is a simple consequence of his claim that no statements apply literally to the Real *an sich*. He claims that the Real *an sich* is beyond such concepts because it is just not the kind of thing to which such concepts could either apply or fail to apply. Is a molecule stupid or clever, or a stone virtuous or wicked?, asks Hick rhetorically. The molecule is surely not stupid, but by failing to be stupid it is not thereby clever; likewise, a lack of virtue does not require that we call a stone wicked. And so it is with the Real *an sich*: certain concepts, indeed, most concepts, do not apply (see Hick 2004: xix–xxii).

Yet Hick does concede that while 'substantial' attributions – that is, those that would give us descriptive information – do not apply literally to the Real *an sich*, purely 'formal' attributions are permissible. One might say of the Real *an sich*, then, that it is 'able to be referred to' or that it is 'that than which nothing greater can be thought'. However, it is vital to Hick's theory that no such formal attributions provide any descriptive content. If Hick were to allow any descriptive content to attributions pertaining to the Real *an sich*, it would follow that some religious conceptions reflected that content more accurately than others. This would entail that some religious conceptions were superior to others, and the way would be open for ranking religions hierarchically, with pride of place accorded to whichever was deemed to possess the most accurate conception of the Real *an sich*. If this were possible, religious pluralism would be on the road to redundancy as the case would be prepared for preferring whichever religion was found to have the most accurate conception of the Real *an sich*.

Hick's critics do not let the matter rest here, though. Yandell argues that Hick's refusal to allow that any statements apply to the Real which attribute substantial properties to it, combined with the uninformative nature of those purely formal concepts which can be applied to it, renders the Real *an sich* unable to play the explanatory role in Hick's pluralist hypothesis that Hick requires it to perform. After all, in elaborating his theory, Hick does attribute substantial properties to the Real *an sich* (such as being the transcendent source and cause of religious experience) that, according to his own lights, cannot apply.

The refusal to admit that any substantial non-formal properties can be correctly ascribed to the Real *an sich* exposes Hickean pluralism to another serious objection. Plantinga poses the problem in the following way: 'If the Real has no positive properties of which we have a grasp, how could we possibly know or have grounds for believing that some ways of behaving with respect to it are more appropriate than others?' (Plantinga 2000: 57, and see Yandell 1999: 78–79). Hick replies to this criticism by reminding his critics that his is a '*religious* interpretation of religion', and as such it is developed from within the religious standpoint that 'there is a transcendent reality of limitless importance to us' (Hick 2004: xxv). Applying the Principle of Critical Trust – according to which religious experience 'is to be trusted except when we have a reason to distrust it' (Hick 2004: xxv–xxvi) – to all religious experience, Hick avers that this reality is disclosed through the religious experiences available within the various religions of the world. Moreover, the authenticity of such religious experiences is judged through its visible effects on human lives, specifically in terms of observable moral and spiritual development. And, of course,

the notions of moral and spiritual development are cashed out in terms of presupposed religious appraisals of the importance of the Real within human life.

As explained above, Hick's pluralist theory is premised upon a *religious* explanation of the diversity of religions and of the diverse forms of religious experience which these religions support. Consequently, Hick's theory will have greatest appeal to those who are already of a religious bent of mind and who are seeking to reconcile the particularity of their own faith-tradition with respect for the traditions of others. The religiousness of Hick's theory is surely what has made it so appealing to religious practitioners, especially those directly involved in inter-religious dialogue, but it simultaneously exposes the theory to the criticism of philosophers who are trained to regard religious convictions not as premises within theories but as standing in need of independent support.

Alternative forms of pluralist theory

We have seen that the most well-known and influential pluralist theory – Hickean pluralism – is explicitly developed and presented as a *religious* theory, and we have observed that this makes the theory especially vulnerable to criticism. In this section, we consider the possibility of developing alternative forms of methodological pluralism that would be neutral with respect to the choice between a religious and a naturalistic interpretation of religion. Consider again what gives rise to the need for a theory of religious pluralism. Disagreements about religious belief, both among religious people of the same or different affiliations and between religious believers and non-believers, are ongoing and often intractable. The scope of such disagreements between people who are roughly epistemic peers is what makes a pluralist account of religious diversity seem desirable. The core of a viable theory of pluralism in the religious domain must be an account of what it means to characterize religious statements as true or false, or as capable of being true or false. The details of such an account will be what distinguish pluralist theories from exclusivist accounts of religious belief (although see D'Costa 1996). According to exclusivist accounts – and following one of the core axioms of classical logic – in cases where claims conflict, at most one of the claims can be true. Truth, on the exclusivist view, is a property that can be possessed by at most one claim from a set of conflicting ones. If one holds such a view, then a theory of methodological pluralism would be redundant as there would be nothing for it to explain (although one may still choose to adopt attitudinal pluralism).

Furthermore, a theory of methodological pluralism is only required if one holds that religious claims can be true or false. If religious claims are thought to be non-cognitive, then the questions methodological pluralism seeks to answer do not arise. One might, therefore, regard methodological pluralism as occupying the conceptual space left between an exclusivist account of religious truth and non-cognitivist or naturalistic accounts according to which religious claims are either all false or are not capable of being either true or false. Clearly, this conceptual space is large and hence is able to accommodate a number of different forms of pluralist theory. Two basic types of methodological pluralism stand out; these can be characterized as reductive pluralisms and non-reductive pluralisms.

Reductive pluralisms hold that all major religions are somehow related to, or derived from, one thing. Religions are thought to be grounded in a more fundamental reality that transcends them all. John Hick's pluralist theory is of this type, as it holds that all authentic religions are related to the Real. But because, as discussed above, Hick further claimed that there is no access to this one fundamental reality except by way of the particular religious traditions, his pluralist theory can be more precisely described as a non-eliminativist reductionist form of pluralism. Clearly, not all forms of reductive pluralism need be non-eliminativist. An example of a form of

methodological pluralism which is both reductionist and eliminativist has been proposed by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. He holds that religions are representations of a single ideal divine form of religion and that they all contain distortions, some more than others (Nasr 1991). In principle, distortions can all be eliminated, leaving only one true religion which will be a perfect representation of the ideal. Interestingly, both Nasr's form of pluralism and Hick's are religious theories, insofar as each identifies in religious terms the fundamental reality on which all particular expressions of religion are based.

Non-reductive pluralisms, on the other hand, do not claim that all particular religions are related to, or derived from, some single transcendent entity. Religions are therefore to be understood without reference to a supposed more fundamental reality which transcends them. There are a number of ways in which the details of non-reductive pluralism can be spelt out. For instance, according to one version – known as internalist pluralism – religions might be represented as different and self-contained conceptual schemata, the claims of which are evaluable only internally to those schemata. Given the lack of a common transcendent object to which these schemata are somehow all related, convergence between them is deemed to be highly unlikely. Hence, eliminativism is avoided.

The great advantage of non-reductive and non-eliminativist forms of methodological pluralism over reductive forms of pluralism is that they are non-religious theories which do not depend for their cogency on positing the existence of a transcendent entity which is characterized in religious terms. Moreover, they are equally unaligned to non-cognitivist or naturalistic perspectives, according to which all religious claims are false (or deemed to be not the sort of claims which could be true or false). In fact, the form of non-reductionist methodological pluralism briefly alluded to above, namely internalist pluralism, leaves it open whether or not any particular claim made within some religious conceptual scheme is true or false. It merely stipulates the methodological framework within which religious claims can be investigated and assessed for truth.

Internalist pluralism is a form of methodological pluralism that is concerned with the nature of truth-claims within different religious conceptual schemata (see Harrison 2006, 2008, 2011). It is based on Hilary Putnam's theory of internal realism, and in particular on his characterization of the relationship between conceptual schemata, ontology, justification, and truth (see, especially, Putnam 1981). Essentially, according to internalist pluralism, all substantial religious claims are made within some conceptual scheme or another and can only be properly understood and assessed within the context of the appropriate conceptual scheme. Hence, all such claims will be found to be true or false only within the relevant conceptual scheme. Consider, for example, the question 'did the Buddha attain nirvana?' Internalist pluralism holds that this question can only be sensibly raised within a Buddhist conceptual scheme. If we want to know what 'nirvana' refers to we must look to the conceptual scheme within which nirvana has a place. It would make no sense to ask whether the Buddha attained nirvana within the framework of a conceptual scheme, such as a Christian one, within which the concept of nirvana did not occur. An internalist pluralist would hold that the meaning of the term 'nirvana' is only accessible within the appropriate conceptual scheme, thus to make judgements about the truth or falsity of claims which include this concept is only possible within that conceptual scheme. Let us say that within a Buddhist conceptual scheme it turned out to be true that the Buddha attained nirvana, what would that imply about the truth or falsity of the claim 'the Buddha attained nirvana' within the framework of a Christian conceptual scheme? The internalist pluralist would claim that it implies nothing. From the truth of a claim within one conceptual scheme one cannot 'read off' its truth within any other scheme. Indeed, this claim may be neither true nor false within a Christian conceptual scheme because nirvana is not recognised as a possible object within a Christian ontology (see Harrison 2008).

There are, of course, problems which internalist pluralism must address, many concerning the cogency of internal realism; these cannot be dealt with here (but see Harrison 2008). The theory has been briefly introduced here merely to illustrate the potential of non-reductive and non-eliminativist forms of methodological pluralism to remain genuinely neutral with respect to different religious conceptions, and between religious and naturalistic interpretations of religion, and thereby to provide a framework within which claims can be investigated for truth without determining in advance which of them, if any, are thought to be true. The possibility of non-reductive non-eliminativist forms of methodological pluralism to deliver such a framework recommends them as potentially capable of supporting the practice of genuinely tradition-neutral philosophy of religion. However, if philosophy of religion is to be developed further in this direction it must face additional complexities arising from engagement with the various philosophical systems that have developed within and alongside non-Western religious traditions, some of which, as we shall now see, already include pluralist theories at their core.

Non-Western pluralisms

Discussions of religious pluralism within the philosophy of religion often overlook pluralist theories that have been developed within non-Western religious philosophies. John Hick noted the similarity of his pluralist theory to the much earlier theory elaborated by the architect of Advaita Vedānta Hinduism, Śaṅkara (788–820? CE). Indeed, the similarity between these theories in both their metaphysics and their epistemology is so striking that one might mount a modern philosophical defence of Śaṅkara's theory by deploying Hick's arguments. Conversely, the arguments targeted against Hick's account of the Real *an sich* apply with equal force to Śaṅkara's account of Nirguṇa Brahman (that is, Brahman without qualities). This is especially problematic given Hick's claim to have proposed a pluralist theory that does not favour any one religious tradition. The similarities between Hick's theory and Śaṅkara's also undermine Hick's repeated assertion that he is not advocating his pluralist theory as an alternative religious tradition. Despite the seriousness of these problems, the issues they raise have not received adequate attention within the literature.

A further striking gap in the literature on pluralism within philosophy of religion concerns the pluralist theory that lies at the heart of Jain philosophy. In response to persistent disagreement about religious and philosophical claims on the Indian subcontinent in the early centuries of the Common Era, Jain logicians devised a sophisticated theory to explain why it was the case that equally rational people supported apparently conflicting views. The explanation that they proposed to account for this troubling fact was premised upon their claim that reality is many-sided (*anekānta*) and that people adopt different perspectives (*nayas*) which allow them to understand selective aspects of reality. They held that adopting a perspective inevitably precludes one from attaining a comprehensive understanding of anything because any one perspective is only capable of giving partial knowledge of what is the case. This conviction led Jains to claim that any single assertion about a thing will be incapable of expressing the whole nature of that thing. They concluded from this that our assertions cannot be unconditionally true, but only true in a certain respect.

In short, the Jains proposed a pluralist theory according to which one could assert such claims as 'X has property *y*' and 'X does not have property *y*' without contradicting oneself. We routinely experience instances of objects both possessing and not possessing a particular property and, as in such cases we do not hold that our experience is contradictory, we should not, they argued, hold that the assertions we form on the basis of our experience are contradictory. The stock example they used to illustrate this idea was a cloth with two colours, blue and grey.

What colour is such a cloth? One answer (a Buddhist one) would be that the cloth has no colour at all and only the individual threads have colour – some being blue and others being grey. Another answer would be that the cloth has a single new colour which is the product of a mixture of the colours of its parts. Both of these views are extremes, according to the Jains, and both, they held, are contrary to common sense. The Jain position is that the cloth is both blue and not blue, and both grey and not grey. As we have seen, they claim that properties such as ‘blue’ and ‘not blue’ are not properly regarded as contradictory because we regularly encounter them in our experience and our experience is not contradictory. Observations such as this led them to propose a method for the analysis of assertions which, they held, was capable of explaining how we can say, for example, both that ‘the cloth is blue’ and that ‘the cloth is not blue’ without actually contradicting ourselves – despite the surface grammar of these utterances.

Jain logicians rejected the principle – which was widely accepted in their own day, as it is in ours – that assertion and denial are mutually exclusive alternatives. They rejected this principle on the grounds that assertions have what they called ‘hidden parameters’ that are not made explicit in our ordinary ways of using language. In their view, assertion does not rule out denial because of the hidden parameters governing the scope of particular assertions and denials. With respect to one set of parameters, one might be able correctly to assert ‘*X* has property *y*’, while, with respect to another set, one might be able correctly to assert ‘*X* does not have property *y*’. They attempt to explain this further by means of their theory of seven modes (*saptabhaṅgī*), according to which any statement can be asserted in seven possible ways (see Ganeri 2001 and, for an introductory account, Harrison 2012a: 42–47).

With their theory of seven modes and their account of the limited nature of perspectives, the Jains proposed a novel framework within which to think about the rival commitments of various religious and philosophical schools. Despite the sophistication of this account there has been little discussion of it within the philosophy of religion. The current neglect of the Jain form of pluralism is perhaps symptomatic of how much further philosophy of religion needs to go in order to become a discipline in which the ideas and perspectives of all (or all major) religious traditions are given due weight. It also points to the deeper issues concerning philosophical methodology that lurk not far beneath apparently straightforward discussions of religious pluralism.

Conclusion

One urgent task now facing philosophers of religion is to continue the process, already well underway, of integrating the philosophical analysis of the claims of non-Western religious traditions into a discipline whose curriculum has until fairly recently been dominated by a focus on Western religious ideas. It seems likely that this process would be facilitated by attention to, and further development of, different forms of methodological pluralism, especially non-reductive and non-eliminativist versions. While the contribution that John Hick’s form of pluralist theory has made to philosophy of religion should not be underestimated, it is time to take the discussion and critical scrutiny of methodological pluralism beyond the framework for debate established by Hick.

While much philosophy of religion now routinely takes into account a variety of religious perspectives, to date there has been insufficient attention devoted to developing a methodology that could underwrite this new approach. Remedying this may well be the most urgent conceptual issue currently facing the subject. Tackling this issue requires that philosophers of religion take into account that different religious traditions have been associated with a number of diverse philosophical traditions (consider the philosophical traditions of India, for example). Despite the fact that philosophers of religion are increasingly expected to be sensitive to this

higher-level philosophical diversity, so far there has been little acknowledgement of the depth of the problems that need to be faced once we take seriously the idea that we might have diversity all the way down, even down to our philosophical traditions and the logical systems which underlie them (see Priest 2006). This suggests that theories of religious pluralism need to develop alongside theories of more general philosophical, and logical, pluralism if they are to be genuinely responsive to diversity on the different levels at which it is found in the various religious and philosophical traditions of the world.

As I have argued above, once the diversity of the world's religious traditions becomes more fully integrated into philosophy of religion, the deeper issues raised by philosophical diversity will also have to be dealt with. A pluralist theory that is adequate to the task will need to be capable of making sense of the practice of philosophy of religion when it cuts across religious and philosophical traditions. A Hickean approach might be adopted – one which seeks to relate all the philosophical traditions to a single 'transcendental' one (the strategy of reduction without elimination). Or an alternative may be sought – such as a form of internalist pluralism – which resists both reduction to one philosophical or religious system and the elimination of diversity.

Notes

- 1 More exactly, what would be correct in each of these cases are the diagnoses of the human condition and the proposed cures of it proffered by each of the traditions. See Yandell (1999: 33).
- 2 'Thus to claim that Brahman, or anything else, is qualityless is to claim that it exists and to deny an entailment of that very claim. Hence Advaita Vedanta metaphysics is not even possibly true' (Yandell 1999: 242).
- 3 For a study of the development of Hick's pluralist view, see Eddy 2002.

RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE

Marci A. Hamilton

Political discourse often borrows constitutional doctrine to twist it to serve the political speaker's own ends. It is up to academics and the courts to illuminate how constitutional values have been warped or transformed in the political process and to steer public discourse onto a more reliable course. In this chapter, I will discuss how those advocating for religious entities have borrowed the term 'public square' from the Supreme Court's free speech doctrine in an attempt to gain leverage for their public policy positions. By using 'public square' as they do, they are not only misrepresenting the actual constitutional value of their position, but also exaggerating its moral appeal.

The 'Public Square' in United States First Amendment free speech doctrine

The First Amendment's free speech doctrine rests on a central trope: speech is freest from government suppression in traditional public fora, e.g., public parks, sidewalks, and town squares. This principle has been repeatedly reviewed and confirmed by the U.S. Supreme Court, as follows: 'In places which by long tradition or by government fiat have been devoted to assembly and debate, the rights of the State to limit expressive activity are sharply circumscribed'.¹ This concept of a free 'space' where speech and lively debate occur contributes to a doctrinal presumption that there will always be a place for free speech, which includes dissenting or annoying,² offensive,³ and even hate speech.⁴ At the same time, by necessity, there are places where speech is not as free, e.g., on military bases,⁵ in schools,⁶ and where it interferes with travel or business.⁷ Criticism has been leveled at the development of this forum doctrine for speech,⁸ but my basic point that there is a presumed public space, or 'square', for free speech is unsailable. The 'public square' for an exchange of views is a cornerstone of liberty and the ability of the people to criticize and correct the government.

This idea of a public space for free speech has been carried to its logical extreme in cases where the Court identifies a private space, like a mall, as such a space, based on a presupposition that there must be some space for the public exchange of viewpoints.⁹

'[T]he shopping center by choice of its owner is not limited to the personal use of appellants. It is instead a business establishment that is open to the public to come and go as they please'

(Chauvet 2003: 1745, adverting to *Pruneyard*, op. cit., 87). In effect, the Court treated a private mall owner as the government for free speech purposes, and treated a mall itself as ‘the functional equivalence of a downtown or central business district’ (Chauvet 2003: 1753, discussing the application of *Pruneyard* to a subsequent California case). Though not explicit in the case, the decision turned on the assumption that spaces generally open to the public are necessary for the freedom of speech generally.

Metaphorically, the media also constitutes a ‘public square’ for speech.¹⁰ The Internet era has transformed our concept of the public square as a space for the exchange of views, because now the exchange can occur without geographical coordinates. As Donohue (2011: 205) observes: ‘The emergence of the Internet has changed the landscape of free speech by giving people “a voice that resonates farther than it could from any soapbox”. And with the Internet’s ubiquitous nature and prominence in today’s culture, it has all but replaced the more traditional forums for debate.’ Indeed, Smith (2009) notes that 82% of Internet users, or 61% of American adults, have visited government websites to exchange viewpoints with others. Schesser (2006: 1791, 1796) analyses the way in which the Internet has become the new forum for political discourse via ‘interactive spaces such as bulletin boards, chats, and listservs ... host[ing] large numbers of opinions (and jousts) between individuals who, potentially, will never exchange words in real space or face-to-face’. Moreover, Zick (2007: 43) discusses the ways in which wireless Internet in public places has transformed individuals into reporters, allowing for investigation and interviewing within public squares, and Frischmann (2012) details infrastructure resources and management decisions, with particular emphasis on the Internet as a public communications infrastructure and network neutrality regulation as an effort to preserve speech in this medium. But these Internet-related developments have simply increased the potential for more speech in a ‘space’.

One fundamental principle in the First Amendment speech cases is that the government may not – particularly in the public square – engage in content or viewpoint discrimination without a compelling government interest.¹¹ Before proceeding, I should explain that there are no absolute rights under the First Amendment, except the absolute right to believe. ‘[The First] Amendment embraces two concepts – freedom to believe and freedom to act. The first is absolute but, in the nature of things, the second cannot be.’¹² Speech lies between belief and conduct on the spectrum of that which is protected by the First Amendment. The government has no opportunity to justify regulation of belief, which is absolutely prohibited, but when a case involves speech or conduct, the government is given the opportunity to justify the suppression of speech or conduct. Most First Amendment cases are driven by the courts’ analysis of whether the law suppresses the speech and an evaluation of the government’s proffered justification for the suppression. The burden on the government is heaviest when there is an argument that the government is discriminating against the speaker’s viewpoint or content.

The rule that the government may not discriminate against particular viewpoints or content, absent a compelling interest, is applicable to religious and non-religious speech. In *Ward v. Rock Against Racism*, where a rock band argued it had a constitutional right to deliver music loudly in a New York city park, a city regulation requiring certain volume control techniques at a local band shell was constitutional, because the regulation was not aimed at the content of the speech, and, in fact, had nothing to do with the content of the speech being conveyed.¹³ The regulation was aimed at the noise generated, as opposed to the content.

The case of *Hill v. Colorado* involved a Colorado statute that regulated speech-related conduct within 100 feet of any health care facility.¹⁴ The statute made it unlawful for any person to knowingly approach within eight feet of another person without that person’s consent ‘for the purpose of passing a leaflet or handbill to, displaying a sign to, or engaging in oral protest, education, or counseling with such other person. ...’¹⁵ The petitioners claimed the statute was

facially invalid in that it prevented them from engaging in ‘sidewalk counseling’ on public ways and sidewalks within 100 feet of the entrances to facilities where abortions are practiced.¹⁶ The Court held that the statute was constitutional, because the statute did not place a restriction on the content of any message and applied to all viewpoints rather than certain viewpoints.¹⁷ Further, the statute established ‘a minor place restriction on an extremely broad category of communications with unwilling listeners’.¹⁸ Conversely, in *Consolidated Edison Co. of New York v. Public Service Commission of New York*, the Court addressed a regulation by the Public Service Commission of the State of New York which prohibited utilities from using bill inserts to discuss political matters.¹⁹ The prohibition resulted from bill inserts from Consolidated Edison which touted the benefits of nuclear energy.²⁰ In response to the bill inserts, the Natural Resources Defense Counsel (NRDC) requested Consolidated Edison enclose a rebuttal prepared by the NRDC in its next billing envelope.²¹ Consolidated Edison refused and the NRDC asked the Public Service Commission to open Consolidated Edison’s billing envelopes to contrasting views.²² Instead, the Public Service Commission adopted the aforementioned regulation, but noted that the regulation did not prohibit utilities from including inserts that are not controversial issues of public policy.²³ Consolidated Edison challenged the order, claiming it was a violation of free speech. The Supreme Court held the order was unconstitutional, because the limitation on speech was based entirely on the content of the insert.²⁴ Moreover, the ‘Commission allow[ed] inserts that present[ed] information to consumers on certain subjects, such as energy conservation measures, but it forbid the use of inserts that discuss public controversies’.²⁵ The Commission sought to justify the regulation as a valid time, place, and manner restriction, but a time, place, and manner restriction cannot be based on the content of the message being conveyed.²⁶ The Commission further sought to justify the regulation as a permissible subject matter regulation in that it applies to all discussion of nuclear power rather than prohibiting a particular viewpoint.²⁷ The Court rejected this argument holding ‘the First Amendment’s hostility to content-based regulation extends not only to restrictions on particular viewpoints, but also to prohibition of public discussion of an entire topic’.²⁸

There is also a principle of speech neutrality: religious speech cannot be excluded if non-religious speech is permitted. In *Rosenberger v. Rector and Visitors of the University of Virginia*, the Court held that the University of Virginia could not deny university funding to a religious group engaging in proselytizing if it was funding other non-religious groups.²⁹ Nor can religious speech be excluded from programs in public schools.³⁰ In *Lamb’s Chapel v. Ctr. Moriches Union Free Sch. Dist.*, a church brought suit alleging that the school district violated its constitutional rights by refusing the church’s request to use school facilities for a religious-oriented film series on family values and child-rearing.³¹ The Court held that the school district violated the Free Speech Clause of First Amendment by denying church access to school premises solely because the film dealt with the subject from a religious standpoint.³²

Like all speech, though, even religious speech can be subject to time, place, and manner regulation,³³ and neutral principles can be applied to restrictions on government funding of religious speech.³⁴ However one puts these cases together, the bottom line is that religious speech cannot be wholly excluded from the public square.

Moreover, this principle is reinforced by the Establishment Clause, which does not permit the government to prefer ‘one religion over another, or religion to irreligion’.³⁵ The government may not endorse any one religion,³⁶ or otherwise choose one religion over another.³⁷

It would be nonsensical, therefore, to talk in the First Amendment context about the government shoving religion out of the public square or not permitting it to enter the public square. That is patently unconstitutional. Yet, various speakers in recent years have used just such terminology to achieve the political end of influencing policy and political issues.

These cases, however, have nothing to do with whether private religious speakers can be removed from the ‘public square’. They cannot be for the reasons stated above. What these cases impose is a restriction on the ability of private religious entities to co-opt the government to carry their message for them.

Private speech vs. government speech

Those using the term ‘public square’ misleadingly for political purposes often confuse their listeners by mixing two types of speech that are necessarily distinct for constitutional purposes. The First Amendment states ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof’.³⁸ By its terms and intention, the First Amendment bars the government from suppressing private speech. For that reason, in every constitutional case, there must be state action against private speech.³⁹

To restate the principle, First Amendment rights exist to protect private speech, not government speech. The government does not have rights to assert against itself. And the government may express content-based positions.⁴⁰ No government could operate otherwise. For example, the United States government must take positions on a wide array of issues, e.g., employment, civil rights, and energy policy.

There is an independent limit on government speech, however, in the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, which bars the government from establishing a religion. In important school cases, including *Lee v. Weisman* and *Santa Fe Independent Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, the Court has held that the government may not endorse a particular religious view. In *Lee*, a public school student and her father sued her school district to prevent the principal from inviting a rabbi to speak at the school’s graduation.⁴¹ The Court held that even ‘nonsectarian’ prayer cannot be given by a clergyman at a school graduation, as this would violate the Establishment Clause.⁴² In *Santa Fe*, the same principle was expanded to the context of a high school football game.⁴³ In that case, the Court held that student-initiated prayers in advance of school football games were not private speech, and that permitting the prayers to continue was impermissible coercive behavior by the school.⁴⁴ Government displays of religious symbols have received similar analysis. In *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union*, the Court held that public display of a crèche in the town square during Christmas by the local government violated the Establishment Clause.⁴⁵ In *McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union*, the Court held that presentation of the Ten Commandments at the county courthouse, in isolation, was a religious display that was unconstitutional.⁴⁶ The Court found a ‘religious purpose’ in the display, even after the exhibition was modified to include American historical documents with theistic and Christian references.⁴⁷

These cases, however, have nothing to do with whether private religious speakers can be removed from the ‘public square’. They cannot be for the reasons stated above. What these cases impose is a restriction on the ability of the government to carry private, religious messages for private entities. Under the Establishment Clause, private religious entities may not co-opt the government to carry their message for them.

Misuse of the term ‘public square’ in political discourse

The American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ) is one of the organizations that has employed the term ‘public square’ in conflicting and differing ways to make political points. In the following statement, they simply restate the constitutional doctrine described above: ‘It is important to note that the Constitution cannot be interpreted to purge all religious reference from the

public square’.⁴⁸ They also have stretched the term to make it sound as though their political enemies have been capable of eliminating religious speech from the public square, as follows: ‘The Left has been attempting for years to drive religious speech from the public square, and to counter this longstanding and well-financed effort, we have to fight hard, and—critically—we have to fight smart’ (French 2011). As explained above, it would be unconstitutional for the public square to be purged of religious speech. The irony, of course, is that the ACLJ is one of the organizations, alongside organized religions and other nonprofit groups, that routinely and frequently insert religious speech, ideas, and policies into the public debate.

The Becket Fund, which is a nonprofit organization serving religious organizations, has asserted that the preservation of religious speech in the public square is one of its primary missions: ‘The Becket Fund defends religious expression from those who would abuse the Establishment Clause in an effort to eliminate religion from the public square ... The Becket Fund believes that religious speech should not be stifled or silenced in the public square, and it defends against attempts to do so.’⁴⁹ In this instance, the Becket Fund was not discussing any specific First Amendment cases, in no small part, because no cases support such a claim. Instead, this is sheer rhetoric.

As explained above, the government may not exclude private religious speech from the public square. True, the Establishment Clause forecloses the government from carrying a religious message for religious entities, but that is a very different point. Since the government may not remove religious speech, such speech is only going to be missing from the public square if religious speakers are not speaking. But the very speakers making these arguments belie that argument. The complaint, at base, is that the separation of church and state precludes religious entities from co-opting the government to further their religious message, not that religious speech is barred or even missing from the public square.

The Catholic bishops, who lost the policy debate with the Obama Administration on whether the Affordable Health Care Act would require all institutions other than churches to provide contraceptive coverage, have employed this very ‘public square’ rhetoric to argue that the policy violates their constitutional rights. Again, there is slippage and deception in the use of the term. According to New York’s Cardinal Timothy Dolan, president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, ‘Never before ... have we faced this kind of challenge to our ability to engage in the public square as people of faith’. Echoing Dolan, Archbishop José Gómez of Los Angeles asserted that ‘religious freedom has always included “the churches”’ rights to engage in the public square to help shape our nation’s moral and social fabric—from the abolitionist movement, to the civil rights movement, to the pro-life movement’ (Glendon 2012). As these statements make clear, the Catholic bishops’ speech has not been exiled or excluded from the public square. Rather, they lost a public policy fight over mandatory contraception, and invoke the ‘public square’ to coat their public policy argument in constitutional rhetoric.

In response to the inclusion of sterilization and contraception as benefits in the Affordable Care Act, several religious groups have claimed that religion is being forced from the public square. Many, including those of CatholicCitizens.org, a group of politically conscientious Illinois Catholics, have referenced Nancy Pelosi’s August 2012 comments to reporters, in which she basically said that she was discussing public policy and not religion. According to Pelosi, if you want to talk about religion you ‘go to church and talk about religion’.⁵⁰ Those who believe that such comments represent a dangerous trend lament that religion is being systematically strong-armed from the public sphere. What they are really saying, whether they realize it or not, is that they are frustrated when the religiously-based argument does not prevail in the public and political debate.

Highly successful conservative talk show hosts like Rush Limbaugh and Sean Hannity have joined this chorus, among others. Limbaugh has an audience of 15 million⁵¹ and Hannity is heard by 14 million.⁵² Their very success and huge audiences undermine their claim that religious speech has been shoved out of the public square, but they use the rhetoric nonetheless. For example, in discussing Cardinal Timothy Dolan's opposition to the Obama administration's stance on birth control, '[Fox commentator Bill] O'Reilly goes one step further, claiming that there is a concerted effort driven by politicians and the secular media to drive religious people away from the public square' (O'Loughlin 2012). He is joined by Sean Hannity, who said about 2012 Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, that '[h]e made it clear that he, like our Founding Fathers, is a man of faith ... He made clear, like our Founding Fathers ... that religion should not be forced out of the public square' (Jurkowitz 2007). Further, he praised *Dispatches from Bitter America* by Todd Starnes, saying the author 'combines sound research with his signature wit to tell the stories of regular Americans who are standing up to a secular movement that seeks to remove all religious expression from the public square. This is a compelling book that puts our entire existence into the perspective of eternity.'⁵³ Again, these statements describe a situation that would be unconstitutional if accomplished or intended by the government. But if the religious speech is absent as a result of private forces, there is no constitutional violation.

The Roman Catholic Church's highest prelate, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, also echoed these sentiments, when he castigated 'radical secularism', arguing that disestablishment principles should not be employed to force the church to 'be silent on certain issues' or 'to sideline believers in determining the values which will shape the future of the nation' (Speciale 2012). He is juxtaposing the Establishment Clause cases with speech cases, and thereby seriously confusing the constitutional categories. The government has not and cannot discriminate against or 'sideline believers' in the public square, and it does not. What the Pope calls 'radical secularism' is the principle that the government itself cannot choose to side with a religious viewpoint or speaker. That principle does not move believers to the side, but rather makes them competitors within the public square like all other speakers, including political and ideological speakers.

For many religious advocates in this context, there is also at base a complaint about the forces in society that compete with religion for the attention of the people, particularly media, including social media, television, motion pictures, cable, and even books. Thus, the base complaint is that religious figures and organizations have been moved off center stage, and work harder to obtain the same allegiance obtained in quieter times. It is not in fact that they are any less present in the public square, but rather they are joined by so many other forces, viewpoints, and voices.

Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney also has expressed the view that religion is being excluded from the public square. In an interview with *Cathedral Age*, the quarterly magazine published by the Washington National Cathedral, Romney lamented that '[those who support the separation of church and state] seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God. Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life. The Founders proscribed the establishment of a state religion, but they did not countenance the elimination of religion from the public square.'⁵⁴ Romney also said that '[the Creator] should remain on our currency, in our pledge, in the teaching of our history, and during the holiday season, nativity scenes and menorahs should be welcome in our public places'. But the candidate here conflates two separate issues: a policy choice by a local government when it comes to teaching history or celebrating the holiday season is not the same as the government forbidding religious discussion to freely enter the public square. Despite the fact that it is politically convenient to do so, merging the two ideas is illogical.

With regard to politicians inserting religion into the public discourse themselves, a recent Pew poll found that a plurality of the public believes that there is 'too much' expression of

religious faith by political leaders.⁵⁵ A majority favors churches staying out of politics, as well. In fact, results showing that the public is concerned with the amount of religious talk by public leaders are at their highest point since 1996, when Pew began asking the question.

Part of the complaint about religion being moved out of the public square likely is linked with the documented slide in numbers of Americans who identify as members of religious organizations. At one point, over 90% of Americans identified themselves as members of an organized religion.⁵⁶ That is no longer the case. Nor do Protestants hold a majority at this point. Though Protestants have historically constituted a sizable majority of Americans, according to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, Protestants are barely maintaining this status.⁵⁷ Today, approximately 51% of Americans identify as Protestant, split between three factions: evangelical churches, mainline churches, and historically Black churches.⁵⁸ In fact, the most recent study shows a sharp decline in the number of Americans who identify themselves as affiliated with organized religion of any kind. In a recent study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, approximately 16% of Americans now say that they are unaffiliated with a religious organization.⁵⁹ This is more than double the percentage of individuals who said they were not affiliated with a religious organization as a child.⁶⁰

Conclusion

Words with constitutional import have a tendency to migrate into common parlance and lose their constitutional roots. Yet, they often retain their rhetorical power, divorced from their constitutional value. For example, ‘discrimination’ is a term that has undergone just such a pattern of use.⁶¹ It has become a pejorative term, that, when employed, paints the one accused of it in a bad light, even if the legal elements supporting the claim are absent. In a similar vein, religious organizations and leaders are now using ‘public square’ to make points, but their use of the term is divorced from its actual constitutional value. This chapter is intended to uncover the phenomenon both generally and specifically.

Notes

- 1 *Perry Ed. Ass'n v. Perry Local Educators' Ass'n*, 460 U.S. 37, 45 (1983).
- 2 *Terminiello v. City of Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1, 4 (1949).
- 3 *Cohen v. Cal.*, 403 U.S. 15, 23–24 (1971).
- 4 *R. A. V. v. St. Paul*, 505 U.S. 377, 391 (1992).
- 5 *Greer v. Spock*, 424 U.S. 828, 840 (1976) (“The Court of Appeals was mistaken ... specifically in thinking that *Flower* stands for the principle that whenever members of the public are permitted freely to visit a place owned or operated by the Government, then that place becomes a “public forum” for purposes of the First Amendment. Such a principle of constitutional law has never existed, and does not exist now.” *Id.* at 836) (internal citations omitted).
- 6 *Bethel Sch. Dist. No. 403 v. Fraser*, 478 U.S. 675, 686 (1986) (holding that schools act within their authority in limiting speech in schools when such speech would undermine the educational purpose of the school).
- 7 *United States v. Kokinda*, 497 U.S. 720 (1990) (post office); *Internat'l Soc'y for Krishna Consciousness v. Lee*, 505 U.S. 672 (1992) (airport).
- 8 Lyriisa Lidsky, Article, *Public Forum 2.0*, 91 B.U. L. REV. 1975 (2011); Matthew D. McGill, Note, *Unleashing the Unlimited Public Forum: A Modest Revision to a Dysfunctional Doctrine*, 52 STAN. L. REV. 929 (2000).
- 9 *Pruneyard Shopping Center v. Robins*, 447 U.S. 74, 81 (1980).
- 10 Bill Sherman, Article, *Your Mayor, Your 'Friend': Public Officials, Social Networking, and the Unmapped New Public Square*, 31 PACE L. REV. 95 (2011).
- 11 *Ark. Writers' Project, Inc. v. Ragland, Comm'r of Revenue of Ark.*, 481 U.S. 221, 231 (1987); *Simon and Schuster, Inc. v. Members of the N.Y. State Crime Victims Bd.*, 502 U.S. 105, 116–18 (1991); *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul, Minn.*, 505 U.S. 377, 404 (1992).
- 12 *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296, 303–4 (1940).

- 13 *Ward v. Rock Against Racism*, 491 U.S. 781 (1989).
- 14 *Hill v. Colorado*, 530 U.S. 703 (2000).
- 15 *Id.* at 707.
- 16 *Id.* at 708.
- 17 *Id.* at 725.
- 18 *Id.* at 723.
- 19 *Consolidated Edison Co. of New York v. Public Service Commission of New York*, 447 U.S. 530, 532 (1980).
- 20 *Id.*
- 21 *Id.*
- 22 *Id.*
- 23 *Id.* at 533.
- 24 *Id.* at 536.
- 25 *Id.* at 537.
- 26 *Id.* at 535–36.
- 27 *Id.* at 537.
- 28 *Id.*
- 29 515 U.S. 819 (1995).
- 30 *Lamb's Chapel v. Ctr. Moriches Union Free Sch. Dist.*, 508 U.S. 384, 393–95 (1993).
- 31 *Id.*
- 32 *Id.* The Court also held that allowing church access to school premises would not have been an establishment of religion.
- 33 *Cantwell v. Conn.*, 310 U.S. 296, 304 (U.S. 1940); *International Society for Krishna Consciousness v. Lee*, 505 U.S. 672 (1992) (Kennedy, J., *concurring*).
- 34 *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*, 561 U.S. —, 130 S. Ct. 2971 (2010).
- 35 *Bd. of Ed. of Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Grumet*, 512 U.S. 687, 703 (1994).
- 36 *Santa Fe Independent School Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000); *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992); *Lynch v. Donnelly*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984); *County of Allegheny v. ACLU*, 492 U.S. 573 (1989); *Texas Monthly v. Bullock*, 489 U.S. 1 (1989).
- 37 *Kiryas Joel*, 512 U.S. 687; *Everson v. Bd. of Educ. of the Twp. of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1, 15 (1947).
- 38 U.S. CONST. amend. I.
- 39 See *Shelly v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1, 16 (alluding to the fact that judicial enforcement of racially discriminatory contracts would be tantamount to state action restricting private speech); *Burton v. Wilmington Parking Authority*, 365 U.S. 715 (1961) (holding that the government's 'joint enterprise' with a private party that restricts speech constitutes state action).
- 40 See *Garcetti v. Ceballos*, 547 U.S. 410 (2006) (holding that '[a] government entity has broader discretion to restrict speech when it acts in its role as employer, but the restrictions it imposes must be directed at speech that has some potential to affect the entity's operations').
- 41 *Lee v. Weisman*, 505 U.S. 577 (1992).
- 42 *Id.*
- 43 *Santa Fe Independent Sch. Dist. v. Doe*, 530 U.S. 290 (2000).
- 44 *Id.*
- 45 *County of Allegheny v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 492 U.S. 573 (1989).
- 46 *McCreary County v. American Civil Liberties Union*, 545 U.S. 844 (2005).
- 47 *Id.*
- 48 Public Prayer, American Centre for Law and Justice, <http://aclj.org> (last visited October 1, 2012).
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- 55 Pew Research Center, *More See 'Too Much' Religious Talk by Politicians* (Mar. 21 2012) http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Issues/Politics_and_Elections/Religion%20Release.pdf

- 56 *In U.S., Increasing Number Have No Religious Identity*, GALLUP (May 21, 2010), <http://www.gallup.com/poll/128276/Increasing-Number-No-Religious-Identity.aspx> (last visited Oct. 31, 2012). As recently as the late 1980s, nearly 90% of Americans said that they had a religious identity. *Id.*
- 57 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Affiliations*, available at <http://religions.pewforum.org/affiliations> (last visited Oct. 31, 12).
- 58 *Id.*
- 59 Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Summary of Key Findings*, available at <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports#> (last visited Oct. 31, 2012).
- 60 *Id.*
- 61 Michael Selmi, Article, *Proving Intentional Discrimination: The Reality of Supreme Court Rhetoric*, 86 GEO. L. J. 279 (Nov. 1997). In this Article, Selmi analyzes how discrimination is defined, and how that definition impacts the Court's assessment of discrimination in various legal contexts.

RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Mehdi Aminrazavi

In the increasingly diverse and multi-religious societies of the West, the topic of religious tolerance has come to the forefront. The concept of religious tolerance permeates the notion of hope for harmony and projects the utopian view that humans, despite their religious differences, can live together in peace. The allure of living in harmony and peace is so strong that it has sparked ecumenical discussions throughout the Western hemisphere, with interfaith dialogues among different religious communities as well as mainstream academic conferences.

While I would like to support the thesis that it is possible and prudent to practise religious tolerance in the ‘genuine sense’, to my dismay, I must defend the opposite. Genuine religious tolerance is, at best, an incoherent concept and, at worst, a perilous illusion. An example of genuine tolerance would be when two individuals looking at a triangle agree that it is a triangle and not a square, or agree that the chairs they are sitting in are chairs and not babies. Such agreements do not require tolerance in the sense of ‘putting up with’ something – they are natural and genuine. Tolerance is non-genuine when I say ‘God is Allah’ and you say ‘God is Jesus’. Since neither of us want to hurt each other’s feelings or escalate the conflict, we simply smile and move on. No agreement or acceptance of the other side is believed, and hence, we have a case of intellectual intolerance or a non-genuine sense of tolerance.

My contention is that religious tolerance in the *intellectual* sense is not a virtue, but a vice. In fact, it is the intellectual intolerance of religious beliefs that is both a virtue and a moral imperative, for the sake of society’s greater good. At the outset, let me be clear that my argument is based solely on an *intellectual* intolerance of religious beliefs. It is imperative to emphasize that while I call for an intellectual practice of intolerance, practically speaking, I find it desirable for everyone to tolerate people of other religions.

The word ‘tolerance’, coming from its Latin root *tolero* means to bear, endure, sustain; it is cognate to *tollo*, to lift up or carry, and derived from the Indo-European root *tela*, to lift or weigh. Tolerance implies that one is putting up with something, suggesting that one who practices tolerance will shoulder the burden of another, presumably for a greater good. By its very nature, tolerance is neither pleasant nor desirable, and as such is merely a means to an end. It is the very nature of this greater good that is the subject of our inquiry. Does intellectual tolerance of religious beliefs bring about social peace and harmony, or precisely the opposite? While the idea of toleration in the contemporary world has come to be synonymous with being civilized and fulfilling one’s civic duty – a key virtue, deemed always to be good – in some rare

cases the same is thought of intellectual (and in some cases physical) intolerance. Surely, most people agree that we should not be tolerant of racism, bigotry, genocide, or child abuse. Intolerance in these cases is not only a virtue but a moral imperative; while tolerating them is a vice and morally reprehensible. Religions have often justified or tolerated racism, bigotry, and genocide through declaring certain races savage, labelling other religions as heretical, and identifying violence as a sacred duty. Pope Urban II initiated the Crusades against Muslims while assuring a place in paradise for the Christians martyred, and radical Muslims consider suicide bombings to be an act of *jihad* and martyrdom. Whether it is the Spanish Inquisition, the Holocaust, the occupation of Palestine, or the violence committed by Muslim *Jihadis*, sacred scriptures are often used as a means of justification. Examples are plenty; the black race is black because it was cursed by God,¹ and the white race is evil because an experiment by a black scientist went bad in Africa several thousand years ago.² Should we not be intellectually intolerant of religions and texts that espouse violence, racism, and bigotry? Furthermore, is it not a moral imperative of modern humans to actively challenge the views that consider vast numbers of people to belong to the untouchable caste in India, that Jews bear the collective guilt of having killed Christ, that only Christians are 'saved', and that polygamy is granted by God to both Muslims and Mormons? These examples are only a small sample of what many religions teach. I question how and why anyone should be tolerant of them. Where is the virtue and benefit of being respectful towards such beliefs, either individually or collectively?

One may argue that I have over-emphasized the more negative aspects of religions and ignore their humane teachings and rituals. Religions are not to be defined solely by their metaphysical claims; there is certainly a treasure house of wisdom that exists in established religions that have survived the test of time. Religions also teach about peace and love; they have created civilizations and have been the source of much good, particularly in reconciling persons to the cruelties of nature. Furthermore, the relationship most people have with their respective religious traditions is not primarily an intellectual one, but rather one of practicality. The average Christian does not dwell on the doctrine of the Trinity, a Jew on the miracles of Moses, or a Muslim on the intricacies of eschatological matters. The lived experience of religions is summarized in a set of moral, practical, and dietary laws. Much of the moral teachings of religions is quite sensible, e.g., charity, love of neighbours, and consoling those in distress, among others.

My contention is not to deny the value of such moral teachings, but rather to allude to the danger that lies in the very basis upon which religious individuals hold such views. It is not the act of charity, loving one's neighbours, consoling those in distress, and fulfilling moral and legal injunctions of religions that is being questioned, but rather the 'logic' of acting based on divine commandment that I find to be unreasonable, unfounded, and unverifiable. Doing good or bad based on an unreasonable, unfounded, and unverifiable ground is harmful to the individuals who practise such views, as well as to the societies that embrace them. It is highly dubious whether societies that tolerate unreasonable ideas for utilitarian reasons are better off in the long term than those who do not.

1

To speak of religious tolerance is, most importantly, to speak of a state of mind in which one accepts another's right to believe his/her doctrinal claims, while nonetheless supposing that those ideas are false, perhaps even egregiously so. To speak of religious intolerance in the intellectual sense is to speak of the act of taking to task objectionable claims to truth that are unreasonable, unfounded, and unverifiable. The question of tolerance becomes particularly thorny when it

comes to reconciling beliefs in absolute truths with beliefs that contradict one another, e.g., when what God has deemed to be sacred is disputed between different religious traditions. The question is, 'How can one remain religious while being tolerant and *not* whether one remains tolerant given the truth of religion' (Aminrazavi and Ambuel 1997). Before presenting my arguments as to why being intellectually intolerant of religious beliefs may be a virtue and a moral duty, let us examine the arguments generally offered in favour of religious tolerance and possible replies to them.

1. *Argument from utility*

If we all intellectually tolerate each other's religious beliefs no matter how preposterous they might be, it would be a more peaceful world. To put it in the much used and abused phrase, religious tolerance is good and necessary for 'world peace'.

Reply: One may argue that religions are often exclusionary and thus divisive to begin with; to tolerate them for the sake of peace would be an oxymoron and detrimental to society. While social cohesion is desirable and societies that are uniform and homogeneous in their belief systems tend to have less divisiveness, tolerating ideas that are utterly unreasonable cannot be good individually or collectively. It would be absurd to tolerate that certain races, religions or ethnic groups are inferior or superior to others, hoping that this would eventually lead to a more peaceful society. Tolerance in this sense is more of a civic duty and does not offer a genuine form of tolerance.

2. *Feel-good argument*

Intuitively, it feels good to get along with others. There is something disconcerting and anxiety-provoking in discord and conflict. Tolerating religious ideas, no matter how different they are from our own, generates a type of genteel and saintly feeling; one may even describe it as a feeling of moral serendipity. One's ability to transcend beyond differences and love the 'Other' bears testament to the type of person one is.

In social gatherings, people naturally tend to be more agreeable and understanding of one another. Few go to social gatherings with the intention of provoking a heated argument. In the feel-good argument, the instinct to be accommodating and agreeable, particularly in the religious domain, appears as accepting and even appreciating the 'Other'. When I, as a Muslim or a Jew, accept your right to be religiously different from me, I have not surrendered my claim to be exclusively right but have made room in my religious universe for you while I acknowledge that you are mistaken in your beliefs. After all, such an accommodation further validates the spiritual truth and superiority of my religion for putting up with you. I tolerate you the same way loving parents tolerate their mischievous children by allowing them to act childish. Imagine the feeling you experience when, in a crowded place, you offer your seat to an elderly or disabled person: the sacrifice results in a feeling of gratification.

Tolerance as *appreciating the other* is a more contemporary concept in which one goes beyond tolerance and actually appreciates 'otherness' as somehow enriching to one self and the spiritual landscape. In this case, one can see the world as a spiritual tapestry, hence appreciating the beauty, wisdom, and richness of individual religious traditions as complementary to one's own.

Reply: The feel-good argument implies and necessitates that I acknowledge the truth of your religious claim along with mine. It would be a contradiction if I strongly disagreed with you and thought your views were unfounded and unreasonable, and yet still somehow appreciated you. Since most religions don't claim to be only partially true, in what way would it be possible

for me to not only tolerate your views when they contradict mine, but also appreciate them? If anything, what is satisfying is to oppose what is unreasonable and irrational, such as the Qur'anic view that heretics should be killed,³ the Biblical view that 'if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out',⁴ or the practice of *Sati* (cremating along with her husband the living wife of a Hindu man who has died). Nothing gives me greater pleasure than to oppose the above ideas that are unfounded and unreasonable, and unverifiable.

3. *Pragmatic argument*

This argument considers religious tolerance to be a practical necessity arising from living in multi-religious societies of the modern world. Members of other religious traditions have settled in the West, and in the absence of an alternative, by necessity, we must tolerate one another. It is said that in France, more Muslims attend mosques than Christians attend churches. By the year 2020, it is predicted that there will be more Muslims in America than Episcopalians. In light of such statistics, what choices do we have but to tolerate one another's religions?

Reply: This argument also reverts to the first – Argument from utility. Namely, tolerance is a necessity for any multi-cultural and multi-religious society interested in social cohesion, law, and order. Although it has social and political utility, this argument promotes tolerance as a convenience, rather than in a 'genuine sense'. This is analogous to when I tolerate traffic laws: I do not like to stop for red lights, but I have no choice. The dual approach to the question of tolerance in a pragmatic argument lends itself to utility versus truth considerations, or what Jordan (1997) refers to as 'benefit directed' and 'truth directed' considerations. In a utility-driven argument, the benefits gained from tolerance exceed the harm which is a sufficient ground for adopting it. The truth-based, pragmatic argument maintains that 'if *p* should turn out to be true, the benefit gained from believing that *p*, will be impressive' (Jordan 1997: 537). The other side of a pragmatic argument is to tolerate someone else's beliefs in case my beliefs turn out to be false or less accurate than I had initially believed. Each of the above propositions is inconsistent with the divinely revealed nature of religious beliefs.

Finally, one wonders if it is in the long-term interest of any society to sacrifice a genuine and rigorous inquiry regarding the truth of ideas held by its members in the interest of having a peaceful society, the so called 'melting pot'. It is the opinion of this author that the eventual fate of a society that sacrifices truth for convenience will be the *melting of the pot*.

4. *Argument from unity*

There are those who espouse the view that the core teachings of religions that have survived the test of time are primarily the same. This school of thought, often referred to in religious studies as 'Perennialism',⁵ argues that the *Truth* that lies at the heart of all divinely revealed religions is the same, but its manifestations appear in different forms, hence different religions. Accordingly, our differences beautify the world; we should embrace rather than shun them. The universality of this Truth, however, can only be comprehended and/or experienced by the intellectual and spiritual elite. The advocates of 'Perennialism', many of whom are prominent academics such as Huston Smith, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Ninian Smart, argue that this is not a new school of thought. Rather, it is a perennial tradition of wisdom that sees Divine unity in a multiplicity of forms and manifestations. Multiplicity of religions is the story of the elephant in the dark room; Ultimate Reality is singular in essence but appears in myriad sacred forms. In the words of S.H. Nasr, 'To live in the world of manifestation is, therefore, to live in a world of opposites which can be transcended only in that reality which is the *coincidentia oppositorum*

and which on their own level are often in opposition and usually intolerant of each other' (Nasr 1997: 43).

Reply: In his article 'An elephant, an ocean, and the freedom of faith', David Cain aptly refers to the major problem of Perennialism when he asks 'Who sees the elephant? The blind persons do not know they have an elephant by the tail or toe. Who draws the circle? Who knows what the blind persons do not?' (Cain 1997: 63).

Perennialists' observations of the similarities among religions have some merit, but they are often over-simplified. While it is true that no religion of which I am aware instructs its members to murder, steal, cheat and lie needlessly, the devil is in the details. The major problem with Perennialism, however, is the fact that its core claim cannot be verified. Perennialists identify Truth with God. Since most religions believe in a supreme deity or lend themselves to theistic interpretation, at their core they adhere to the notion of a Supreme Reality. In other words, a Muslim, a Jew and a Christian, despite their differences, actually believe in the same Truth, even if they do not know it.

Perennialists argue the spiritual elite can experience the inner truth of religion through a special epistemic mode of cognition, such as mystical vision, intellectual intuition, or philosophical insight, and can therefore comprehend the universal nature of this Truth. The assumption is that St. Thomas Aquinas of Christianity, Avicenna of Islam, and Maimonides of Judaism must have known the same Truth. And yet, disagreements among the spiritual and intellectual elites are abundant. From the above, it follows that several thousand years of religious arguments, wars, and atrocities have been based on misunderstandings of the same truth that lies at the heart of their respective traditions.

For the majority of religious people, every aspect of their religion is as sacred as any other, and therefore the Perennialist model of dividing a religion into a shell with a kernel of Truth at the heart of it is unacceptable. While to most Muslims, the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus has no special significance for their faith, to a Christian, the crucifixion and resurrection *is* the most important part of the Christian message.

The following story symbolically depicts why the argument from unity inevitably runs into difficulty:

I was walking across a bridge one day, and I saw a man standing on the edge, about to jump off. So I ran over and said, 'Stop! Don't do it!' 'Why shouldn't I?' he said. I said, 'Well, there's so much to live for!' He said, 'Like what?' I said, 'Well ... are you religious or atheist?' He said, 'Religious.' I said, 'Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?' He said, 'Christian.' I said, 'Me too! Are you Catholic or protestant?' He said, 'Protestant.' I said, 'Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?' He said, 'Baptist!' I said, 'Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?' He said, 'Baptist Church of God!' I said, 'Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you reformed Baptist Church of God?' He said, 'Reformed Baptist Church of God!' I said, 'Me too! Are you reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?' He said, 'Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!' I said, 'Die, heretic scum,' and pushed him off the bridge.⁶

When even the apparently most insignificant differences in religious belief can generate such large amounts of hostility and hatred, it is very hard to believe that the teachings of the many religious sects and denominations are all essentially the same.

2

In the foregoing discussion, I have considered some of the arguments for religious tolerance and concluded that, at best, a superficial sense of toleration can exist for utilitarian reasons. Let us now examine whether it is possible for a *genuine* sense of religious tolerance to exist, and, if so, what the necessary conditions would be.

I can be tolerant of your beliefs in the genuine sense if I find merits in your beliefs, but that requires that we operate on a mutually agreed-upon set of criteria in determining the truth or falsehood of beliefs. As John Hick puts it, 'any ground for believing a particular religion to be true must operate as a ground for believing every other religion to be false; accordingly, for any particular religion there will always be far more reasons for believing it to be false than believing it to be true. This is the sceptical argument that arises from the conflicting truth claims of the various world faiths' (Hick 1999). When I am tolerant of another's religious beliefs in the genuine sense, I can say, 'I have no problem accepting this and that idea of yours, because I can see how that can be true'. Tolerance, in the genuine sense, is when I and the person with whom I am speaking present what we both consider to be reasonable and verifiable. When members of different religions disagree with one another, one of the following must be the case:

1. We both are wrong.
2. We both are right.
3. I am wrong, the other is right.
4. I am right, the other is wrong.

The first proposition cannot be true since divine revelations must have been captured and reflected in at least one religion. Otherwise, either there is no divine revelation and thereby no religious truth, or a divinely revealed religion exists such that no one knows it. The first view negates the authenticity of all theistic religions, and the second is absurd. Given the contradictory truth claims and practices in various religions, the second possibility cannot be true, otherwise God must have contradicted Himself. For instance, eating pork is either inherently good or inherently bad and thus permissible or impermissible for all. God would be contradicting Himself if He instructed Christians that it is permissible for anyone to eat pork but instructed Jews and Muslims that it is impermissible for anyone to eat pork. The third proposition is unacceptable because if I know I am wrong, why would I continue to hold such beliefs? That leaves us with the fourth alternative: one of us is right and that person can only be me.

Clearly, if I hold certain beliefs with conviction, I must be convinced that they are true and those of others contradicting my beliefs are false. In order to be intellectually tolerant of someone else's beliefs that contradict or are substantially different from my own, I must allow that my beliefs be partially or completely incorrect. This is a possibility that cannot exist if or when my beliefs are based on a divinely revealed scripture.

As mentioned before, to have a coherent discussion on religious tolerance, we must adopt a model or a mode of discourse that is mutually agreeable and verifiable to all concerned and that can only be a discursive reasoning that lends itself to verifiability. Any epistemic claim based on private experience or any other non-propositional or unverifiable truth claim does not leave much room for discourse. Among the epistemic bases for such claims, we can mention mysticism, intuition, or truth by personal or scriptural authority. If one can provide clear and consistent evidence to prove the falsity of my beliefs, why would an intellectual tolerance of my beliefs be called for? Furthermore, how can I be expected to be tolerant of the religious beliefs of anyone holding beliefs different from mine if or when I am convinced of the absolute truth

of my beliefs? Even if I am proved wrong, I will take refuge in the fact that the Lord works in mysterious ways and that God's logic is superior to that of humans. Consider the following hypothetical argument between a Muslim and a Christian:

MUSLIM: What evidence do you have that Jesus was God as well as the son of God? It simply does not make sense.

CHRISTIAN: The Bible clearly confirms Jesus' divinity. Besides, either Jesus was a liar or he wasn't. He was not a liar and therefore he must have told the truth. What makes you question Jesus' divinity?

MUSLIM: The Qur'an says he was neither God nor the son of God and the Qur'an is the word of God.

In the above conversation, how can a genuine case of intellectual tolerance be expected of either side? Such an expectation requires that the Muslim or the Christian would have to allow for the possibility of the fallibility of their scriptures, in which case they would each cease to be followers of their respective faiths.

In the foregoing discussion, I have established a case in favour of being intellectually intolerant towards those who hold religious beliefs. Let us now go one step further and turn our attention towards why the practice of religious intolerance in its intellectual sense is both a virtue and a moral duty. In my view, there is a moral imperative for humans to be engaged in an aggressive form of inquiry when it comes to religious beliefs, as opposed to the passive form of tolerance that is promoted today. Given that the very logic of claims based on divinely commanded beliefs is most often unfounded, unreasonable, and unverifiable, it is my contention that intellectual intolerance must be practised towards those who hold and propagate such beliefs. This *intolerance* could also be described as casting a heavily critical eye on divinely commanded beliefs and the actions that may arise from believing in them. Such intolerance is good and necessary both in and of itself and for the sake of the greater good of a society.

I take it to be self-evident that it is one's moral duty to be intolerant of racism, bigotry, slavery, and child abuse. I furthermore take it to be clear that those who hold such beliefs do so based on unfounded, unreasonable, unverifiable, and insufficient evidence, even though they think otherwise. Advocates of such views exercise a type of 'faith' supported by the so-called 'fact' that the white race is superior to blacks, or the Nazi perspective that gypsies and Jews are inferior to those of Germanic roots. The logic of such views does not change when we change the label of a religious or secular school of thought which advocates certain truths based on truth by authority. One often finds truth claims in religions that are seemingly harmless: Muhammad physically ascended to heaven on horseback, Jews must keep kosher, Moses parted the Red Sea, and Jesus walked on water. What is harmful in these cases is not the nature of the claims but the logical basis upon which such beliefs are held to be true by so many; i.e., an authority, stated in a divinely revealed book or decreed by God directly.

The family resemblance between the logic of the radical views stated above and those of a religious nature held by so many is essentially the same: it is not *what* is said that matters as much as *how* one has arrived at the conclusion. Precisely this 'howness' necessitates the practice of intellectual intolerance. One must be intolerant of any truth claim that is unreasonable and unverifiable no matter how seemingly harmless it might appear. If we tolerate the incoherent logic that Moses opened the Red Sea, Jesus was resurrected from the dead, or Muhammad was told by God he may have as many wives as he wants, why not tolerate truth claims made by KKK, Nazis, or Bin Laden, whose claims are also based on an authority or Divine commandment? Acceptance of truth by authority seems to be the logical basis of these groups even though the context of their claims is clearly very different.

It is imperative to note that I am not neglecting the positive side of the moral teachings of the great religious traditions, nor am I comparing them in all aspects with criminal cults and hate groups. My argument is that the epistemic mode that underlies many claims made by the religious peoples and members of hate groups or cults is the same. They are claims based on *faith* enshrined by a body of superfluous evidence, which upon careful examination does not stand up to the scrutiny of reason. In fact, if religiously held beliefs did withstand the scrutiny of reason, there would not be a need for 'faith'; just as faith is not required to accept that $2+2 = 4$.

The argument I have advanced here bears some resemblance to that advanced by Clifford in his essay 'The Ethics of Belief'. Clifford argues that beliefs in general, and religious beliefs in particular, are not private matters, as is generally believed to be the case. In fact, he questions whether privately held beliefs can even exist in a society in which one's beliefs inevitably affect others in some form or fashion. Clifford asserts, 'It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence'. Based on what Clifford calls 'the web of belief', members of a society are not to be seen as isolated islands, but rather as a series of interconnected entities, each of which influences all the others. Our beliefs, according to Clifford, affect other people directly and indirectly, and likewise, we are affected by others. For him, there exists a 'web of belief' in a society in which our lives are interwoven. Given the above argument, how one comes to form one's beliefs necessarily not only affects an individual's character, but also has an impact on the society as a whole. If I have formed my beliefs based on unreasonable, unverifiable, and insufficient evidence, and I then propagate them as truth to others, this will affect my audience, however miniscule the effect might be. The majority of religious people have been taught by other religious people that certain beliefs are facts. Few people, during times of slavery, questioned the logic of the inferiority of blacks if they grew up with the notion; the concept became integrated into the culture and was accepted as a norm. The same unfounded, unreasonable, and unverifiable beliefs that underlie the concept of slavery or racism can still be found among individuals who believe in the inferiority or superiority of a race or religion.

Advocating unreasonable and unverifiable beliefs creates an unhealthy environment where free and fair debate becomes difficult. In their most benign forms, these attitudes can lead to the acceptance of beliefs based on a text, authority, or mystical experience, while in their most malignant forms, they can produce hateful and destructive ideas. Peace and coexistence do not come from intellectual tolerance and acceptance of beliefs based on faith – a shallow and fragile social etiquette is the more likely outcome of tolerance based on utility.

3

The argument I have advanced is that an intellectual intolerance of biased, unfounded, unreasonable, and unverifiable claims is a moral imperative. Intellectual intolerance and challenging those who hold ideas based on pure faith leads to the eventual demystification of claims based on absolute notions of truth or falsehood. I have also made a case that even though many ideas and concepts in religions are seemingly harmless and compassionate, the danger lies not in the content of the belief, but rather in the process of *how* one has arrived at such beliefs. Reasons for being intellectually intolerant of religious claims may vary, but it is always harmful to the intellectual integrity of individuals and society to hold unfounded, unreasonable, and unverifiable beliefs. One may raise the question of how it is possible to respect others if we think their convictions are unreasonable. To this, I reply that understanding the 'Other' is not the necessary condition for respecting the 'Other'. I do not have to understand the indigenous religions of Australian aborigines or the Bush people of South Africa in order to respect them. I can respect them as

individuals while rejecting their belief systems. Respect and reverence for others as individuals is just as morally critical as opposing others' beliefs that are unfounded, unreasonable, and unverifiable is morally imperative.

Notes

- 1 The standard Biblical justification for this is that, after the flood, Noah cursed Ham – his youngest son – who had seen him naked. See Genesis 9: 25–27.
- 2 This view is held by the 'Nation of Islam', a uniquely African-American version of Islam.
- 3 Qur'an 5.33: 'The punishment of those who wage war against Allah and His apostle and strive to make mischief in the land is only this, that they should be murdered or crucified or their hands and their feet should be cut off on opposite sides or they should be imprisoned; this shall be as a disgrace for them in this world, and in the hereafter they shall have a grievous chastisement.' Qur'an 4.89: 'They wish that you should disbelieve as they disbelieve, and then you would be equal; therefore take not to yourselves friends of them, until they emigrate in the way of God; then, if they turn their backs, take them, and slay them wherever you find them; take not to yourselves any one of them as friend or helper.' (And, of course, Bukhari 52;260: 'The Prophet said, "If somebody (a Muslim) discards his religion, kill him."')
- 4 Mark 9:47. In Matthew 5:29 we read 'If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away'.
- 5 Though 'Perennialism' considers itself to have ancient roots, the name appeared in the early part of the twentieth century CE. Among its major figures are R. Guénon, A.K. Coomaraswamy, F. Schuon, and S.H. Nasr, who argue for the essential unity of religions based on a common esoteric reality.
- 6 A story by the comedian Emo Phillips.

RELIGIOUS VIOLENCE

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Introduction

Throughout history religions have inspired both violence and peaceful opposition to violence. A diversity of stances on violence, including deep and principled repudiations of violence, are reflected in the core values and teachings of many religious traditions. However, violent acts have been committed in the name of most of the world's religions. Religious violence has a history which is partially recorded in sacred texts from the ancient world, remains a pervasive feature of contemporary life, and will occur again. While reflection on questions about the relations between violence and religion is not new, interest has been amplified in recent years, not least in response to the terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C. on September 11, 2001. A wide range of concerns in this area are looming large in the public awareness, including causal and evaluative questions such as: Why do people commit acts such as these, and how can we understand the role that some sorts of religious commitments play in such destructive behavior? Under what social conditions do religious groups tend to become involved in violence and why does it erupt as frequently as it does even among those groups that ostensibly cherish peaceful ideals? Under what circumstances, if any, is violence justified and how might religious considerations enter into attempts to rationalize violent actions? What sorts of good and harm are done by 'religion' and would the world be better off without it? Religious violence now frequently arises as a topic in global discussions about secularization, religious revival, fundamentalism, conflict resolution, and the place of religion in an ever changing world. It has also led some to question the limits of the liberal ideal of tolerant pluralism. One can expect the body of sustained philosophical reflection on topics related to religious violence – alongside the contributions of religious scholars, historians, psychologists, sociologists, political scientists, and economists – to continue to expand sharply in the years ahead. Philosophers continue to contribute to such ongoing conversations in a number of ways, not least by clarifying key concepts, ensuring that important questions are well-posed, making relevant distinctions, and, perhaps most characteristically, by identifying and evaluating the quality of arguments offered for various positions. This chapter offers an overview of some of the main issues at stake in current topics of discussion and some suggestions concerning issues that warrant further analysis.

Conceptual preliminaries

The focus of recent discussion of religious violence has centered not on those who suffer persecution owing to their religious identity but on its perpetrators. Religious violence in the latter sense refers to violence such that the religious commitments of the actor(s) play a significant role in explaining their motivations or reasons for acting violently. However, giving even this sort of boundary to the topic is not unproblematic, since opposing sides to a conflict often draw the lines between terrorist and freedom fighter, suicide bomber and martyr, or aggressor and victim in different ways. Even more fundamentally, what is violence, and how shall we understand religion? The task of clarifying such key concepts falls among the foundational issues for any discussion of the complex and varied relations between violence and religion, and the quality of the definitions selected by researchers can affect the results and interpretation of empirical studies. Even if we focus on human acts of violence, there are a lot of ways to act violently and a great diversity of phenomena that fall under the heading of religion. The examples and initial glosses of violence and religion in this section are put forward not as attempts at final analysis, since these concepts themselves continue to be subjects of contention, but for the purpose of identifying issues involved in offering further characterizations and as entry points into discussion of the larger issues that generate interest in the topic. Equipped with an understanding of violence, for example, scholars can proceed with the tasks of distinguishing between different types of violence (such as political violence or self-defence) and clarifying conceptual relations between other concepts of interest such as terrorism.

Violence

We can understand violence, at least as a rough first pass, as action with the intent of inflicting harm. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines violence as ‘the exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury on or damage to, persons or property’. The clearest cases involve physical injury to humans in situations where the use of force is in some way excessive or destructive. Striking a cheek, gouging an eye, murdering a brother, raping a woman, stoning for blasphemy, burning the accused at the stake, ritualistically sacrificing a child, murderous rioting, detonating a suicide bomb in a crowd of bystanders, hijacking a plane, mutilating by torture, beheading a captive, and launching a cruise missile at enemy forces are paradigmatic violent acts. These might be premeditated far in advance or impulsive reactions to provocation.

A number of further issues might be debated about the definition of violence or how to refine the criteria to be used in identifying it. We could press on the above suggestion by asking: Does violence really require the intention to harm, or can accidental human actions, or even events like earthquakes, be violent? Wouldn’t the above proposal classify pricking voodoo dolls with pins as an act of violence, even if no harm was done? Should we understand violence to include not just bodily damage but psychological forms of harm like verbal abuse or damage to property as when works of art are boisterously destroyed or a copy of the Qur’an is publicly burned? Ought the definition be broad enough to include institutionalized social arrangements that foster racism, worker exploitation, and class disparity, which Johan Galtung labeled ‘structural violence’, or does this risk turning the concept of violence into a mere catch-all for items about which we express politically correct disapproval? A range of positions can be defended, some clearer and closer to the mark than others. Employing an extended notion of violence, Galtung (1969) takes it that ‘*violence is present when human beings are being influenced so that their actual somatic and mental realizations are below their potential realizations*’, whereas Audi (1971) offers a three part analysis which takes a different stand on some of these issues:

Violence is the physical attack upon, or the vigorous physical abuse of, or vigorous physical struggle against, a person or animal; or the highly vigorous psychological abuse of, or the sharp, caustic psychological attack upon a person or animal; or the highly vigorous, or incendiary, or malicious and vigorous, destruction or damaging of property or potential property.

Clear discussions of the philosophical literature on the nature of violence can also be found in Coady (1986) and Burgess-Jackson (2003).

The positions we take on the nature of violence can have consequences for discussion of related issues. However, for most purposes, the dictionary definition of 'violence' is serviceable enough. So long as we are clear enough to avoid confusion and resolve remaining issues in a way that countenances the paradigmatic examples of violence given above, as any adequate definition surely must, a certain amount of vagueness need not impede further discussion. We might, for example, go on to define terrorism as the unlawful tactical use of violence or the threat of violence to create continuing public fear in order to achieve a social or political end, or to characterize torture as a deliberate use of violence to inflict severe physical and/or psychological suffering usually as a means of punishment, coercion, or out of sadistic pleasure. (Further questions could also be raised about these definitions. Does terrorism have to be unlawful? What about cases that otherwise qualify but against which there are yet no existing laws in place explicitly prohibiting them? Is the above gloss on torture too broad to distinguish it from the definition of terrorism?) We could even, without confusion, speak of violent meteor impacts on the moon several billion years ago which damaged neither persons nor property and involved no intentions (or at least none obviously discernible to us, granting the possibility that these were acts of God) while recognizing this extended sense of 'violence' as a departure from the examples most central to ordinary use. Indeed, there are reasons to resist the demand for rigorous definitions of either 'religion' or 'violence' at the outset, which can itself lead to unnecessary muddles. Flawed or short-sighted characterizations might lead to an artificial or distorted picture of, or invite misguided questions about, the phenomena we seek to understand.

To describe an act as violent is often, though by no means always, also to evaluate it negatively. Many of the examples that generate concerned discussion about religious violence have a particularly nasty or brutish character. Yet, while the potential evils of violence are apparent, some would argue that acts of violence can manifest virtues such as courage, heroism, selflessness, and loyalty and, moreover, that there are circumstances under which violence is not simply morally permissible but required. As Coady (1986) points out, it is therefore desirable to avoid building moral judgments into the definition. Some sort of normative judgment – at least as an initial presumption open to challenge – is likely unavoidable, as even the notions of harm, injury, or damage, involve evaluation (Burgess-Jackson 2003). Even those who defend the moral permissibility of violence in a limited range of circumstances often regard it as regrettable or as recourse of last resort. But if violence were simply defined as the illegitimate or wrongful use of force, this would preclude substantive discussion about whether violence can sometimes be justified and under what circumstances. We would be forced either to say that the notion of a just war is incoherent or to deny, implausibly, that any legitimate use of force is violent even if it results in tremendous loss of life. Killing in self-defence, for the protection of others, in military service to one's nation-state, or as part of a revolt aimed at securing freedom – whether justified or not – can clearly involve violence. Pacifists and war hawks, protesters and riot police, should insist on a largely descriptive approach to defining violence and then go on to argue for their positions on the morality of war or its limits and whether violence can be

justified. Similarly, those who would defend the moral permissibility of torture ought to do so on grounds such as its alleged effectiveness in procuring important information or as a deterrent to, or just retribution for, certain types of behavior, rather than by denying that it involves violence (Coady and O'Keefe 2002).

Religion vs. religions

Identifying some forms of violence as 'religious' inevitably draws on some sort of characterization of religion. Religion clearly has something to do with sacred beliefs, values, and practices, with ways of life oriented around reverence for the transcendent or supernatural, often a God or gods. In ordinary use, 'religion' includes everything from the indigenous myths of tribal people from every continent, polytheism, pantheism, Western monotheism, deism, nontheistic forms of Eastern meditation, private religions, New Age movements, to doomsday groups like the Heaven's Gate cult in California. A determined attempt to define 'religion' might consider more than fifty proposals, some more adequate than others (Leuba 1912). But attempts to specify some clear and informative set of necessary and sufficient conditions that identify the genus of which all and only religions are species have not found widespread consensus.

Indeed, a number of religious scholars resist attempts at the abstract characterization of 'religion'. Scholars do sometimes disagree about whether Buddhism and Confucianism are best classified as religions and many reject the presupposition that there can be a crisp definition which captures a unified or homogenous essence common to all the above forms of religion, while excluding groups bound together by secular ideologies and institutions such as Marxism, capitalism, and environmentalism, therapeutic groups, football fans, workers' unions, militias, bowling leagues, and charities or patriotic social clubs. Perhaps, as Cavanaugh (2009) argues, such efforts to define religion are a misguided relic of seventeenth and eighteenth century categories imposed on the domain of investigation by modern Western European scholars seeking to partition it from the secular political sphere, often in the interest of justifying violence in the name of the state. On this more post-modern or deconstructivist view, it makes little sense to categorize human sacrifice as a religious act, rather than a political one, in an ancient Egyptian culture where Pharaoh is considered a god. One need not deny the possibility of an integrated and comparative perspective on world religions to appreciate the point that a deep understanding of religion requires learning about particular religions, each studied on its own terms.

Rather than arguing about necessary and sufficient conditions, then, we might instead start with examples of major religious traditions such as Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism. We could then proceed to characterize each tradition, identifying key founders, cultures of origin and subsequent history, texts, teachings, practices and the like. But neither are these traditions monolithic; within each one finds a great deal of diversity, in some cases such a spectrum of differences as to raise interesting questions about what it can mean to see subgroups as part of a shared religious tradition. In Christianity, for example, there are profound differences at the level of doctrine, values, and practice between the early Desert Fathers in ancient Egypt, the Russian Orthodox Church tradition, Southern Baptists, Pentecostal movements in Africa, and Catholic liberation theologians in Latin America, as well as disagreements within any of these local communities. It is important to recognize the diversity and autonomy of individual actors even where we go on to draw reasonable generalizations about what binds these groups together (Appleby 2000).

In light of these considerations, perhaps it is preferable to treat religion as a family resemblance or cluster concept and to draw up a list of characteristics typically, though not always, associated with religion. Alston (2005) offers a helpful list of 'religion-making characteristics',

including items such as belief in supernatural beings (gods), a distinction between sacred and profane objects, ritual acts focused on sacred objects, prayer, a moral code believed to be sanctioned by the gods, arousal of characteristically religious feelings (such as awe, a sense of mystery, guilt, and adoration) during the performance of ritualistic practices or in connection with the ideas about a divine agent or agents, organization of an individual's life around a worldview or general picture of the world, and social groups whose identities are bound together by these sorts of characteristics.

While these definitional complications do not imply that we lack clear examples or a reasonably adequate understanding of 'religion' suited for general use, they do arguably have implications for the kinds of questions that we can helpfully pose about religious violence and for the range of phenomena which get grouped under such a category. Consider the now often debated question: Is religion inherently violent? Framed in this way, such questions can invite superficial or simplistic answers and even obscure the issues by failing to notice the diversity among the phenomena that fall under any nuanced and descriptively adequate explication of the concept. It should not be assumed at the outset that any connections there might be between violence and twentieth-century Satanism in California will also hold for Jainism in ancient Kalinga. Surely such judgments are better made in light of the evidence relevant to particular cases. Serious attempts to understand the particular traditions, values, beliefs, and practices of people in different times, places, and social contexts and any connections they might have to violence cannot ignore variations in the stances and attitudes we encounter. Moreover, enough is known about religious phenomena to give us reason to be suspicious of global claims about a single relation between religion and violence supposed to apply at all times and places. If the goal is to understand the complex relations between violence and religions in their various manifestations and as they change over time, there is no avoiding detailed local investigation.

Recent and historical examples of religious violence connected with major world religions

Some of the most visible treatments of religious violence in recent years play to popular outrage at religiously motivated atrocities in the service of apologetics and anti-religious propaganda. Much of the latter work has especially targeted Islam while expressing concern that religion in general, whether in fundamentalist or more moderate guises, provides a social backdrop for extremism. Bestselling author Christopher Hitchens (2007) argues that religion 'poisons everything', while Richard Dawkins (2006a, 2006b) maintains that it is the 'root of all evil' and that humanity would be better off without religion since 'Only the willfully blind could fail to implicate the divisive force of religion in most, if not all, of the violent enmities in the world today' (Dawkins 2003: 161).

There is no shortage of examples of religious violence from the past or in the daily news. Frequently discussed episodes of violence with some sort of religious connection include: human sacrifice in Ancient Near Eastern cultures and in the indigenous populations of South and Central America; the Israelite conquest of Canaan; Islamic expansions starting under Muhammad; the medieval Christian Crusades; torture and execution at the hands of the Inquisition or other religious authorities; the brutality of Spanish conquistadors who colonized the Americas; the French Wars of Religion; the Thirty Years War; the Taiping Rebellion; anti-Sikh militancy in the Punjab region after the partitioning of India and Pakistan; group suicides in Jonestown; abortion clinic slayings; nerve gas attacks on the Tokyo subway by the Aum Shinrikyo cult; and the destruction of the World Trade Center. As Sam Harris (2004) recounts:

Indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past. The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews versus Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians versus Catholic Croatians; Orthodox Serbians versus Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants versus Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims versus Hindus), Sudan (Muslims versus Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims versus Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims versus Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists versus Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims versus Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite versus Sunni Muslims), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians versus Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis versus Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. In these places religion has been the *explicit* cause of literally millions of deaths in the last 10 years.

(Harris 2004: 26)

Harris artfully supplements such lists of polarizing conflicts with graphic descriptions of specific atrocities that must alarm and concern any conscientious person, such as this *New York Times* report of violence between Hindus and Muslims in India from 2002:

Mothers were skewered on swords as their children watched. Young women were stripped and raped in broad daylight, then ... set on fire. A pregnant woman's belly was slit open, her fetus raised skyward on the tip of a sword and then tossed onto one of the fires that blazed across the city.

(cited in Harris 2004: 2)

It is indisputable that religion has served as a powerful motivation for violence. Violent acts have been and continue to be committed in the name of religion across the globe, and there are innumerable horrors, violations, and failings which rightly concern citizens of the world for which various religious groups should acknowledge responsibility and repent. Lists of atrocities sometimes appear on scorecards in polemical arguments between critics of religion and apologists attempting to weigh these social ills against those acts similarly attributable to atheists or secular regimes or whatever involvement religions have had in supporting hospitals, universities, welfare programs, famine and disaster relief efforts, charities, and other positive forms of social action. A balanced and empirically informed discussion of the place of religion in social life should also come to grips with the recent wave of sociological and psychological studies that suggest robust statistical correlations between different measures of religious commitment and social goods such as crime prevention, education, health benefits, charity, and other measures of subjective well-being (for an entry into this vast literature and discussion of its philosophical implications, see Miller 2012). While there is, of course, a danger that highlighting only the most shocking and extreme acts of religious violence will contribute to distorted or stereotyped characterizations of religion, the above examples illustrate the divisive role that religious identity can play in conflicts at the group level, including both *inter*-religious conflict (e.g., between Orthodox Serbs, Catholic Croats, and Muslim Bosnians in the former Yugoslavia, or between Sinhala Buddhists and Hindu Tamils in Sri Lanka) and *intra*-religious conflict (e.g., between Catholic and Protestant Christians in Northern Ireland or Sunni and Shia Muslims in the Middle East).

There is no question that coming to grips with the religious dimensions of such conflicts will often be crucial to understanding them. Religious passions frequently evoke deep fervor, emotional attachment, and out-group enmity, and religious convictions are often among the short list of things for which people are willing to die. However, these examples also display some of the complications that arise in identifying 'religious violence' as a distinctive form of

violence designated for analysis alongside groupings such as political violence, ethnic violence, sexual violence, and domestic violence. First, philosophers should think more about what sorts of basic categories are most probative for systematic treatments of violence. Why not instead, for example, classify violence according to forms of personal violence (such as murder) and social violence (such as war), while treating personal animosity, greed, racial prejudice, politics, or religious factors as they enter into these? At any rate, because classifications of violence often allow for considerable overlap and religious factors can play a role in suicide bombing, torture, or almost any of the other categories, attempts at systematic treatment or empirical study of religious violence must cover a wide terrain. Second, when analyzing a particular episode of violence it is often difficult to disentangle the role and relative importance played by religious factors from, say, political or economic factors or other influential aspects of the situation and treating it as an instance of 'religious violence' may cloud rather than clarify what is going on. Such challenges are compounded when one is attempting to characterize a prolonged conflict with multiple instances of violence. Third, in cases where violence does have a religious dimension, we can go on to ask: What exactly is the connection between religion and violence here? To what extent are the perpetrator's intentions and actions connected to the goals of the religious group of which he or she is a member? Are they rooted directly in the core values and teachings of that religion? Is what we are seeing simply indicative of the general moral failings or evolved tendencies of human beings, to be expected in any community of appreciable size and only contingently associated with religious ideas? A lone wolf with a psychopathic profile might have been disposed to violence regardless of cultural context. In other cases, marginalized groups feel driven to desperate measures and, though religious language or symbols are invoked, their cause may be in service of other ends.

Reasons and causes for religious violence?

Recent decades have brought a wealth of sociological and psychological research on religious violence taking the form of quantitative studies, in-depth case studies, and participant interviews. These studies make available a great deal of information about both individual motivations of violent actors and their wider social circumstances. Some of this information has challenged widely held assumptions: suicide attackers do not come simply from the ranks of the uneducated, poor, or socially alienated, and, from a clinical perspective, very few are mentally ill (Atran 2003; Introvigne 2009). Among the 9/11 hijackers were scientifically literate middle-class professionals. It also makes clear that no single psychological profile can cover all forms of religious violence (Jones 2008).

Two distinctions can help us to characterize several of the broad efforts to understand why people commit such acts of violence. Theoretical approaches to explaining and predicting violent behavior differ, first, in the extent to which they look to individual psychology versus wider social circumstances, and, second, with respect to the weight they give in their explanations to the cognitive rationales articulated by violent perpetrators themselves. For example, psychoanalytic approaches influenced by Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1918) have tended to downplay the importance of stated beliefs in explaining and predicting religious violence, looking instead to the unconscious workings of the inner psyche, such as the repression of basic instincts or deeply rooted desires for gratification or revenge. René Girard (1972) develops the Freudian idea that symbolic and ritualistic expressions of violence, such as the sacrifice of a scapegoat, serve to redirect and dissipate aggressive instincts that might, if frustrated or suppressed, otherwise lead to more socially destructive acts of violence. This is a different, though not necessarily incompatible, explanatory starting point from approaches like that of political

scientist Robert Pape, who focuses primarily on contextualizing religious violence within its political setting. After analyzing all of the documented acts of suicide terrorism worldwide between 1980 and 2009 (350 incidents between 1980 and 2003, followed by a sharp increase to 1,833 over the next six years), Pape concludes that, despite the widespread assumption that the root cause of these threats is Islamic fundamentalism (which was around well before the turn of the new millennium), the main factor driving such attacks was the desire to strategically resist foreign military occupation (Pape 2005; Pape and Feldman 2010). Similarly, seeking to place these discussions in a broader evolutionary framework, anthropologist Scott Atran takes research in social psychology to support the claim that 'Although both personal and contextual factors affect action, studies of individual behavior in group contexts show situation to be a much better predictor than personality' (Atran 2004: 47).

Other sociologists and cultural critics insist that the most straightforward explanations of such acts must make reference to the specifically religious goals and self-understanding of the actors and that taking such considerations seriously is crucial to understanding religious violence (Juergensmeyer 2003; Harris 2004; Selengut 2003). The types of rationales offered as reasons for action are of particular philosophical interest. The fact that masked representatives of Al Qaeda brandishing AK-47s are saying things like, 'We are now forming suicide cells to make jihad in the name of God' in videos (Nordland 2012) and are actively engaged in long term planning for such operations raises an unavoidable set of questions about the connections between religious ideas, explicitly articulated reasons for action, and behavior.

The following combination of beliefs is just one sort of recipe for violence:

- (1) God exists;
- (2) We are morally obligated to submit to God's will;
- (3) God wills me/us to kill a particular person or group of people.

The first two beliefs are common in many religious traditions. (Their scope could be further extended by substituting some other transcendent power for 'God'.) In fact, many theists would hold something stronger than (2), granting that God is to be obeyed above all considerations of reason or moral intuition, as exemplified in Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac. At least on one interpretation of the Genesis narrative, Abraham's obedience to God supersedes ordinary moral judgments and his action displays what Kierkegaard terms a 'teleological suspension' of ethical considerations. Adding beliefs like (3) to such a mix can literally be explosive.

Motivations for premises like (3), or sets of beliefs and attitudes giving rise to less stark forms of violent aggression, might stem from moral revulsion at the larger culture one feels compelled to confront, a sense that one's religious identity or core values and beliefs are under attack, that one is playing a role in a cosmic struggle of good against evil or facing some emergency situation that overrides ordinary moral standards, appeals to conscience or revelation, intolerance or fear of outsiders, or a sense that some differences in metaphysics or matters of doctrine are worth dying for, a conviction that torturing the body of a heretic is justifiable if it can save her soul or that apostasy is punishable by death, or that God has given one's people sacred land. Some of these motivations might be reasons that perpetrators of violence would cite if asked to justify their actions or they could appear as explanatory considerations in a sociologist's attempt to identify causes for instance of religious violence, alongside the observation that some religious teachers instruct young, weak, or easily influenced people that it is their duty to kill. Consider, for example, the reasoning of Michael Bray, a Lutheran minister and member of the terrorist organization Army of God. Bray offers the following sort of argument in his attempt to morally justify the killing of medical personnel at abortion clinics: Good people ought to have resisted

the Nazis with violence, if necessary. Abortion is the slaughter of innocent children; a moral atrocity comparable with the situation in Nazi Germany. So, good people ought to resist abortion with violence, if necessary. In this way, Bray sees himself as an advocate of change who stands in opposition to the existing social order and sees violence as a justifiable tactic by which to bring about rapid revolutionary change (Bray 1994). Obviously there are a lot of cases of religious violence in which the connection between belief and action is far less direct and straightforward. But even where the reasoning is made explicit, we might be concerned about the extent to which those appealing to such a line of thought are open to critical dialogue. One concern is the belief that an act of violence is commanded by God might lead people to suspend or ignore ordinary moral sentiments. A second, related, worry is that someone who holds such premises dogmatically or as an unchallengeable absolute might simply opt out of reasoned discourse or ignore criticism or calls for reform which could otherwise serve as a check on the proposed course of action.

Neither Bray nor Al Qaeda, of course, represent majority positions on violence in either Christianity or Islam, and literally millions if not billions of people would characterize them as fringe extremists who are hijacking the very traditions to which they claim to belong. The vast majority of religious persons around the world do not advocate such violence. While the reasoning of such extremists can and should be evaluated independently, mistaking a preoccupation with such cases in the context of discussions about religious violence for evidence that the highly publicized actions of extremists are typical can give rise to serious misconceptions and unwarranted generalizations about the connection between religious movements and violence (Bromley and Melton 2002). It is common for religious groups to take official stands condemning hateful crimes as immoral and to work for peaceful forms of reconciliation. Religious historian Scott Appleby (2000) argues that such unsung religious peacemaking movements, which often collaborate with secular nongovernmental humanitarian organizations, can have a crucial role to play in resolving some of the deadly conflicts that religion has exacerbated. Another important project, therefore, is to examine what the founders of major religions, influential texts, and mainstream contemporary leaders say about violence committed in its name.

Texts of terror?

One can find strong affirmations of peaceful ideals and ways of life as well as rationales for the sanctity of human life in each of the major world religions. The notion of *ahimsa*, the avoidance of violence or harm to living things, has a central place in the Hindu, Jain, and Buddhist traditions. A scrupulous effort to avoid inflicting unnecessary suffering leads some monks not only to principled renunciations of violence and vegetarianism, but to handle plants, insects, and even rocks with delicacy. The Hebrew concept of peace, *shalom*, is an important aspect of Jewish teaching, 'Islam' is a cognate of *salām*, the Arabic word for peace, and Christians celebrate Jesus as the 'Prince of Peace' prophesied in Isaiah 9:6 and greet each other with the passing of the peace. But there are also places where violence finds expression in religious symbols and rituals as well as sacred texts and teachings that seem to license or even exhort violence.

For example, in the Torah – a text revered as divine revelation by each of the Abrahamic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) – we encounter not just frank portrayals of the realities of violence in human relations, including murder and rape, but also prescriptions for punishment (e.g., stoning adulterers), violent acts portrayed as commandments of God, and images of God as a mighty warrior. Consider the terms in which these texts present the military conquest of Canaan:

But as for the towns of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance, you must not let anything that breathes remain alive. You shall annihilate them – the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites – just as the Lord your God has commanded, so that they may not teach you to do all the abhorrent things that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord your God.

(Deuteronomy 20:16–18)

God is here understood to have *commanded* genocide; an annihilation that includes women and children and makes no distinction between combatants and noncombatants. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, Joshua is seen as carrying out the destruction in obedience to Yahweh's expressed will.

So Joshua defeated the whole land, the hill country and the Negeb and the lowland and the slopes, and all their kings; he left no one remaining, but utterly destroyed all that breathed, as the Lord God of Israel commanded.

(Joshua 10:40)

Moreover, God is portrayed as a violent actor who directly intervenes in human affairs:

For it was the Lord's doing to harden their hearts so that they would come against Israel in battle, in order that they might be utterly destroyed, and might receive no mercy, but be exterminated, just as the Lord had commanded Moses.

(Joshua 11:20)

Narrative portrayals of God as a jealous and vengeful judge whose wrathful deeds take the form of floods, plagues, and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah have offended the moral sensibilities of ancients like Marcion and many moderns alike. Exodus 22:18, most memorably translated in the King James Version as 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live', was cited as biblical justification for the execution of tens of thousands of marginalized women in early modern Europe.

Given their holy status, texts such as these clearly invite a range of exegetical and moral questions and criticism. Some critics take these as examples of the moral bankruptcy of religion and even go on to argue that the problematic or objectionable teachings are not confined to fundamentalist or literal readings but inherent in mainstream orthodoxy. Responses of adherents to these religious traditions range from simply accepting the texts at face value perhaps on the pain of revising some contemporary moral intuitions or by positing that there must be some reason that we do not understand, seeking benign interpretations or to reconcile disturbing or morally troublesome passages with other core values and teachings about God as a compassionate, loving, and merciful redeemer, advocating ongoing reforms that change the practices of one's own tradition for the better over time, to largely ignoring or dismissing the texts as the all too human relics of a more barbarous age. For example, with reference to the Joshua 11 passage, biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has argued that 'Yahweh gave permission for Joshua and Israel to act for their justice and liberation against an oppressive adversary' (Brueggemann 2009: 23) and the Israelites' actions went well beyond the circumscribed use of violence that Yahweh had authorized. Interpreted in this way, Brueggemann argues, the narrative is not as disturbing as it might otherwise have seemed. In recent years scriptural scholars and theologians have written a great deal in an attempt to respond to public interest in religious violence (e.g., Bekkenkamp and Sherwood 2003; Bernat and Klawans 2007; Boustani, Jassen, and Roetzel

2009; Collins 2003; Craigie 1978; Desjardin 1997; Freitheim 2004; Gibson and Matthews 2005; Kang 1989; Lüdemann 1997; Miller 1973; Niditch 1993; Schwartz 1997; von Rad 1926/1991; and Williams 1991). The finest treatment of these issues by philosophers is Bergmann, Murray, and Rea (2011).

Even where religious teachings do not condone violence so explicitly, there can be concerns that they might foster latent attitudes with a more indirect potential to lead to violence. Consider Adolf Hitler's invocation of religious rhetoric in a speech delivered in Munich on April 12, 1922:

My Christian feelings point me to my Lord and Savior as a fighter [tumultuous, prolonged applause]. They point me toward the man who, once lonely and surrounded by only a few followers, recognized these Jews and called for battle against them, and who, as the true God, was not only the greatest as sufferer but also the greatest as a warrior.

(quoted in Steigmann-Gall 2003: 37)

Even granted that Hitler's attempt to stir anti-Semitic sentiments and mobilize political support for the Nazi cause is clearly incompatible with Jesus' central teachings and lived example, the effectiveness of the rhetorical tactic clearly relies on Hitler's expectation that his remarks will be met with some degree of social approval that can be manipulated in the service of his own ends. While it may be that atrocities tend to be committed by extremists, some nevertheless worry that, without external or internal criticism, even moderate and liberal religious communities might serve as a backdrop from which extremists or perpetrators of hate crimes can emerge. In hindsight, many Christian communities are now much more sensitized and responsive to the potential danger that certain New Testament passages (particularly in the Gospel of John or in reference to Jesus' crucifixion) and Luther's *On the Jews and Their Lies*, demonize 'the Jews' in ways that can incite hatred and violence. Others have worked vigilantly to transform the internal dynamic of their tradition by critiquing attitudes that might lead to hostilities directed at women or homosexuals.

Early Islam also saw a period of military conquests, and similar concerns can be raised about verses from the Qur'an and various holy teachings (*hadith*) in Islam, including concerns about the severity of punishments found in the *shar'ia* or divine law (such as cutting off the hand of a thief in accordance with Qur'an 5:38), violence against women (stemming from passages such as Qur'an 4:34, which seem to offer instructions about conditions under which it is appropriate for husbands to beat their wives), and passages which call for seemingly continuous war on infidels which can end only with their submission or annihilation (e.g., Qur'an 9:5; 9:29; 9:73; 9:123; Sahih Muslim C9B1N31; and Sahih al-Bukhari B2N24). The Qur'an instructs Muslims to 'Fight in the cause of God against those who fight you, but do not begin aggression, for God loves not aggressors' (Qur'an 2:190). Without further contextual cues or constraints on issues such as how far back in the past one can look to assign responsibility to other parties for starting the fight or whether preemptive strikes are justifiable, such a verse seems at least *prima facie* to legitimize retaliatory violence and to leave wide latitude for interpretation about the permissible scope of fighting. Due to the frequency of appeals to the notions of *jihad* (variously translated as 'struggle', 'striving in the way of God', or 'holy war') and martyrdom by contemporary militant Islamic groups like Hezbollah, Hamas, and Al Qaeda, these notions have recently come under particular scrutiny. One topic of intense recent debate has been whether the ideals and teachings of Islam are more violent than those of other religions, as Harris (2004) and Hitchens (2007) claim, or whether this is a reactionary and politically charged cultural misrepresentation of mainstream Islam (Lumbard 2009; Milton-Edwards 2011; Esposito 2011).

These texts and teachings are open to varying interpretations and differing views about their status. But they are examples of the kind of material that serves as the basis for a recently burgeoning literature on religious violence which explores the implications of such ideas in each of the major world religions and a host of new religious movements, begins to pose the pointed questions that need to be asked about them, and attempts to offer a fair and scholarly exposition and critique of the range of positions that have been adopted.

Traditional religious justifications for violence and peaceful opposition

Reflection on the sorts of moral and religious considerations that might permit or constrain the use of violence connects with wider philosophical arguments about the justification, phenomenology, and significance of violence (see Arendt 1970; Stanage 1974; Sherman 1974; Vries 2001; Honderich 2002; Corlett 2003; Coady 2008; Bufacchi 2009; Eckstrand and Yates 2011). What sorts of principles, intentions, consequences, virtues and vices, or features of situational context are relevant to the moral evaluation of acts of violence? Might deontological and utilitarian approaches reach dramatically different conclusions about the moral permissibility of certain types of religious violence? What place, if any, do major normative ethical theories give to religious considerations in arguments for or against the use of violence? Are there not moral obligations of nations to citizens, parents to children, and passersby to innocent victims to protect and defend human life that are strong enough to require intervention with violent force if necessary? On what grounds might one categorically reject recourse to violence? Questions like these – as well as the examination of violence in connection with issues surrounding differences in power or vulnerability, of personal and collective identity, and of experiences associated with things like the alienation of others as strangers which are prominent topics in continental philosophy – bring philosophy into close engagement with topics of public interest.

Two broad and prominent traditions with religious roots, namely just war theories and principled commitments to nonviolence such as pacifism, have influenced contemporary international policies that place certain humanitarian constraints on the waging of war such as the Geneva and Hague conventions as well as the Charter of the United Nations, statements on human rights, approaches to conflict resolution and reconciliation, as well as interdisciplinary academic work in ‘peace studies’. Due to space limitations I shall focus primarily on the Christian tradition, and this all too briefly, but parallels may be found in other religions as well (Johnson 1981; Brock 1998; Kelsay 2009).

Within the Christian tradition there is a long tradition of theological reflection, influenced by Augustine and Aquinas, on the conditions under which war is justifiable and how to conduct a just one. Though just war theory is by no means limited to Christianity, the classic work for theorists in the just war tradition is Thomas Aquinas’s treatment in *Summa Theologiae* 2a2ae.40 where, in response to the question of whether it is always sinful to wage war, Aquinas argues that three conditions must be met in order for a war to be just: the war must be undertaken by a legitimate public authority, for a just cause (such as defense against aggression, reclamation of unjustly seized property, or responding to a serious threat to the public good), and with good intentions (such as the aim of establishing peace, resisting wrongdoing, or punishing evildoers) rather than out of a wicked desire for revenge, advancement of power, or cruelty. From a moral perspective, balancing the goods of, say, liberating an oppressed people against the loss of life, especially to parties innocent of the injustice in question, can require some tough judgment calls. Developments and refinements of the just war tradition typically also insist that those who take up the sword should do so only as a last resort, after exhausting attempts at peaceful resolution of the conflict, and where there is a reasonable chance at success. Military engagements

should not directly target non-combatants and take care to limit their indirect harm, not use excessive force in achieving objectives, and the destructive consequences of the war itself should not outweigh realistically achievable outcomes (Walzer 2006).

Others have felt the duty to seek peace is incompatible with violence in any form or at least that recourse to violence should only be exercised in severely restricted circumstances. Pacifists, for example, oppose war almost without qualification and maintain that more peaceful approaches to conflict resolution are nearly always available. Conscientious objectors refuse to participate in the violence of war as incompatible with their values. In the twentieth century, the leaders of two of the most significant political movements emphasizing active non-violent resistance to injustice and aggression – Mahatma Gandhi’s struggle to free India from British rule and Martin Luther King Jr.’s leadership in the civil rights movement – were inspired by religious ideals. Each of these led to the development of a number of creative expressions of civil disobedience, non-cooperation, and strategies that seek to awaken and appeal to the moral sensibilities of the aggressors by confronting the brutality of their actions while refusing to retaliate (Sharp and Paulson 2005). Even otherwise sympathetic critics such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer have worried that this will not work, or would come at too great a cost, against certain types of aggressors – such as psychopaths or tyrants who dismiss the demands of morality – who might otherwise either be deterred by the threat of retaliation or stopped by it. Both Gandhi and King recognized that the price of such an approach would often involve real and significant suffering, but they hoped to elicit a moral and spiritual transformation in the aggressor that could open the way to reconciliation.

Within the Christian tradition, one of the primary sources of inspiration for a steadfast commitment to nonviolence comes from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount. Jesus’ teachings elevate the value of peace (‘blessed are the peacemakers’ Matthew 5:9), revise or reinterpret authoritative teachings (‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also’, Matthew 5:38–39), and place high moral demands on followers (‘love your enemies’, Matthew 5:44). Jesus also sharply rebukes disciples who wish to take up swords on his behalf (Matthew 26:52; Luke 22:51; John 18:11). To be sure these teachings are part of a longer narrative in which Jesus also says things like ‘Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword’ (Matthew 10:34), but obedience to the substantial non-violent dimension to Jesus’ teachings has been a particular point of emphasis among Anabaptist, Amish, Mennonite, and Quaker communities. Moral visions along these lines have been developed in the works of writers such as Hauerwas (1983), Yoder (1992), and Wink (2003).

Conclusion

The project of examining the role that religious commitments have played and continue to play in contributing both to violence and to its decline is clearly an important and timely task. Despite deep and significant differences on many matters, there is widespread recognition of at least some moral constraints on violence, that peace is a good to be desired, and that some forms of violence committed in the name of religion are morally appalling and these have occurred with a truly regrettable frequency. Those seeking to develop and defend an informed perspective on religious violence today have available a wide range of interdisciplinary resources and the clear trend in this area, as in areas like philosophy of science and philosophy of mind, is for philosophical work that emphasizes a close level of engagement with the facts on the ground.

In *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (2011), Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker presents a massive body of empirical data from prehistory to present to make a

case that, despite the tremendous loss of life due to violence in the twentieth century and a ballooning world population, rates of death due to violence have persistently, if unevenly, declined and that we are living in the most peaceful era in our species' existence. Most of us are less likely to be murdered, executed, ritually sacrificed, beaten, raped, be casualties of war, or to meet some similarly gruesome fate than humans in earlier, less civilized, populations. Pinker's thesis is controversial, but he argues that if things seem otherwise this is due to our increased global awareness and sensitivity to violence. Confronted with the ongoing reality of violence, the availability of terrifically efficient weapons large and small, and the open possibility of nuclear war, perhaps most readers – whether secular or religious – can share in the longings of the prophet Isaiah, who yearns for a more peaceful time when people 'shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more' (Isaiah 2:4).

Part VI

Religion and ethics

RELIGION AND META-ETHICS

Michael Smith

Religious accounts of ethics are as diverse as religious views themselves: think, for example, of the differences between the views of Muslims, Jews, Biblical literalists, Roman Catholics, Unitarian Universalists, Buddhists, and Hindus. Though God's existence – where God is understood to be the all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful creator of everything – is crucial to both the religious view itself and the ethical facts according to some sub-groups of these, it is totally irrelevant to either or both according to others. Since it would be impossible to comment on the implications of even a representative sample of such different views in one brief chapter, my task will of necessity be severely circumscribed.

The question on which I will focus is very much a contemporary philosopher's question, but one that I hope will be of interest to both religious and non-religious readers alike. What should we make of the relationship between the existence of God as understood above, on the one hand, and our ethical obligations, on the other, in the light of views about the nature of ethical facts that have become almost standard in contemporary meta-ethics? Is the view that God's existence is crucial to the existence of ethical facts inconsistent with the views of contemporary meta-ethicists? Alternatively, and at the other extreme, do the views of contemporary meta-ethicists commit them to thinking that God's existence is crucial to the existence of ethical facts? The answers to these questions turn out to be at least somewhat surprising.

Let me begin with the meta-ethical background. For much of the twentieth century, the dominant view in meta-ethics was some form of anti-realism (Ayer 1936/1946; Hare 1952, 1963, 1981; Blackburn 1984). Simplifying somewhat, anti-realists held that ethical judgements don't express beliefs about what the ethical facts are, but instead express our fundamental desires and hopes about the non-ethical nature of the world. Suppose we want very much for people to be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing on condition that their taking up that opportunity doesn't preclude others from having it as well – from here on I will ignore this desire's complicated condition – and suppose that we express this aspiration by judging that it would be good if people were given that opportunity. According to the anti-realists, our use of the ethical word 'good' in such a judgement doesn't refer to an additional ethical feature, *goodness*, possessed by the state of affairs in which people are given the opportunity to live a life of their choosing, a state of affairs otherwise characterizable in wholly non-ethical terms. Rather, it encodes in language a switch from a context of assertion in which we use our words to express our beliefs about how the world is, to one in which we use our words to express our

desires about how the world is to be. Anti-realists thus hold that there are no *ethical* facts, as such, and that the role of ethical judgements was never to express beliefs about a domain of such facts in the first place. The role of such judgements is and always has been to express our hopes and dreams concerning the non-ethical nature of the world.

Various important consequences were supposed to follow from this. It is agreed on all sides that our beliefs are rationally evaluable, as they are supposed to be based on reasons that bear on their truth: evidence favours our believing what is likely true given the evidence. This is an objective relationship that holds between evidence and belief. But our fundamental desires and hopes, since they are not capable of being true or false, were supposed by the anti-realists not to be rationally evaluable in this or any other way. The anti-realists admitted that we disparage those who don't care about things like people being given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing. We say that they are insensitive to the considerations that favour their desiring such things, where these considerations are the non-ethical features of the states of affairs themselves – that is, what it would be like for people to lead lives of their own choosing – but the claim that they are insensitive to these considerations, and the further claim that these considerations favour such desires, were themselves supposed by the anti-realists to be just expressions of further desires or hopes. So even though anti-realists thought that when evidence favours belief, this entails that there is a reason for the belief, they rejected this entailment in the case of desire.

The picture that emerges is thus one according to which those of us who make ethical judgements have a complex array of desires: we desire that people be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing, we desire that everyone desires that people be given that opportunity and are averse to those who lack the desire, and we desire that those who lack the desire acquire it by imagining what it would be like for people to lead lives of their own choosing. According to the anti-realists, desires like the first get expressed in the judgement that the state of affairs is good, and desires like the second and third get expressed in the judgement that the nature of that state of affairs favours people desiring it and that people who lack that desire are insensitive. The insensitivity of those who lack such desires was thus supposed to be nothing like the insensitivity of those who believe contrary to the evidence. Evidence favours our believing things in a very different way from the way in which the non-ethical natures of the states of affairs that we desire were supposed to favour our desiring that those states of affairs obtain, according to the anti-realists. The first is a matter of reasons, which is an objective relationship between evidence and belief, whereas the second isn't.

The contrast with the views of meta-ethicists at the end of the twentieth century, and even more so in the twenty-first century, couldn't be more stark. The dominant view is now a kind of realism (Smith 1994, 2013, forthcoming; Scanlon 1998, 2014; Shafer-Landau 2003; Enoch 2011; Parfit 2011). The exact form that this realism should take is a matter of considerable dispute, but according to nearly all parties to this dispute, ethical judgements do express beliefs about ethical features possessed by states of affairs. Indeed, many who remain sympathetic to anti-realism now also admit that this is so as well, something that makes their disagreement with realists difficult to state (Gibbard 1990, 2008; Blackburn 1998; Dreier 2004). What brought about this radical change in view? The explanations vary. Some came to be realists because they thought that the sense of 'favouring' in which considerations favour our believing certain things can't be distinguished from the sense of favouring in which considerations can be said to favour our desiring certain things. Since favouring is what reasons do, they concluded that there are reasons both for believing and for desiring. Others came to be realists because they thought that they could show that certain desires are constitutive of optimally functioning agents, and that the premises of this argument turn out to favour our having such desires in the very same sense

in which the old anti-realists thought that evidence favours believing. Such theorists thus also came to the conclusion, albeit by a different route, that there are reasons for both believing and desiring.

How does realism follow from there being reasons for both believing and desiring? Realism follows because, once these claims are granted, an ethical feature of a state of affairs, such as its being good, can be seen to be nothing over and above its having a certain feature we can characterize in terms of reasons and desire. To give just one example, a state of affairs' being good might be taken to be nothing over and above its being a state of affairs that there is a reason to hope or desire obtains. The existence of the ethical fact follows by definition from the existence of the reason to desire or hope that it obtains, a reason that might be taken to consist in the non-ethical nature of the state of affairs itself. And what goes for a state of affairs' being good goes for an act that brings about this state of affairs being obligatory as well. Any act that is obligatory is an act that brings about a state of affairs with a non-ethical nature that there is reason to desire obtains, where that reason is once again the non-ethical nature of the state of affairs. It thus turns out to be no surprise that theorists who convince themselves that there are reasons to desire and hope for things end up being realists.

On the face of it, this would seem to be very bad news for the view that the existence of ethical facts depends in some fundamental way on the existence of God. Consider the following part of a speech made by Pope Francis. He begins by explaining how his concern for the poor led him to choose his name, but then continues:

there is another form of poverty! It is the spiritual poverty of our time, which afflicts the so-called richer countries particularly seriously. It is what my much-loved predecessor, Benedict XVI, called the 'tyranny of relativism', which makes everyone his own criterion and endangers the coexistence of peoples. ... There cannot be true peace if everyone is his own criterion, if everyone can always claim exclusively his own rights, without at the same time caring for the good of others, of everyone, on the basis of the nature that unites every human being on this earth. One of the titles of the Bishop of Rome is Pontiff, that is, a builder of bridges with God and between people. ... My own origins impel me to work for the building of bridges. ... In this work, the role of religion is fundamental. It is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God.

(Francis 2013)

What should contemporary meta-ethicists make of this? They should stand firm with Pope Francis in eschewing relativism. If there are reasons to care about the good of others, then these are reasons for everyone to care about the good of others, and all that is required for people to come to care about the good of others is that they be sensitive to the reasons that there are in the formation of their cares and concerns. Contemporary meta-ethicists should, however, take issue with Pope Francis's suggestion that it is impossible for people everywhere to come to care about each other while ignoring God. What is he imagining God's role to be?

Consider once again our example. As we have seen, if there is a reason for everyone to want very much for people to be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing, then all that's needed for people to care about others in this way is for them to be sensitive to the reasons that there are for their wanting this, where these reasons are provided by the non-ethical nature of that state of affairs. If God has a role to play then it would seem to be at best an *enabling* role. Openness to God might get people to see that there is this independent reason for caring about others. But it isn't clear why God is the only one who could play this enabling

role. Any people or institutions capable of educating people could play it, even institutions and people who ignore God. For example, the family might play this role, as might various community-oriented organizations. Many atheist parents seem to do a pretty good job of bringing up their children to be sensitive to the reasons that there are for caring about others, and many Unitarian Universalist ministers do a pretty good job of helping their congregations acquire that sensitivity as well, even those who make a point of not mentioning God in their ministering out of respect for the atheists in their congregations. The idea that it 'is not possible to build bridges between people while forgetting God' would seem to be an empirical claim at best, and a fairly implausible one at that.

But it isn't only claims made by religious leaders that are undermined. Philosophical views according to which obligations must be defined in terms of God's will or commands are also undermined (compare Quinn 1978 with Hare 2007, and for commentary see Murphy 2012). Consider first the Divine Will Theory; we will return to the Divine Command Theory later. According to the Divine Will Theory, people ought to act in a certain way if and only if and because God wills them so to act, where willing is in turn understood to be either desiring or intending. For present purposes we can ignore the differences between these two formulations of the theory, and assume that it is God's desires that are important. The official argument against this is a version of Plato's *Euthyphro* dilemma (Plato 2002). Either God desires that people act in a certain way for a reason, or he doesn't, and that no matter which it is, the Divine Will Theory turns out to be false.

Suppose that God desires that people act in a certain way for a reason. What could the reason be? The only plausible candidate, according to the official argument against the Divine Will Theory, is that people are obliged to act in that way. But if the act's being obligatory is God's reason for desiring that people act in that way, then it isn't true that it is obligatory for them to act in that way because God desires them so to act. The dependence goes the other way around: God's desire depends on the independent obligation. The Divine Will Theory is therefore false. The Divine Will Theory doesn't fare any better on the other horn of the dilemma either. Suppose that God desires people to act in the way that is supposed to be obligatory for no reason at all. He has a completely arbitrary whim that people act in that way. It is hard to see how this could make their acting in that way obligatory. Imagine people who fail to act in that way and then cite as their reason the fact that they had an arbitrary whim of their own to act in a different way, and that God's contrary arbitrary whim provided them with no reason to act in accordance with his whim and contrary to their own. How could God fail to accept this justification? God's whim doesn't obligate God. He could change his whims on a whim. So how could his whims obligate others?

Of course arbitrary whims, whether possessed by God or ordinary people, do provide reasons when it is a mark of respect to go along with them. Consider, for example, the arbitrary rules that apply in certain households when people have dinner together: hands must be washed; men must wear shirts with collars, rather than wear crew-neck t-shirts or go bare-chested; hair must be neatly combed; people must sit up straight on all four legs of their chairs, rather than leaning back on the rear two legs; elbows must be kept off the table; and so on. Some of these rules may be conventional, but others are more idiosyncratic, tied to practices within particular families. To this extent, these rules can be seen as expressing arbitrary preferences about how people are to behave at the dinner table. Such arbitrary preferences can, however, be reason-providing, if satisfying them is a mark of respect. Similarly, the fact that God has a certain whim may provide all of us with a reason to do what he whimsically wants us to do if so acting is what we would have to do to show respect for him. Importantly, however, though God's arbitrary whim would, to this extent, be reason-providing, it would only be reason-providing

given its connection with the reason we have to show God respect, where that reason isn't based on an arbitrary whim. The Divine Will Theory, which in effect seeks to ground all reasons in arbitrary whims, is thus plainly false (compare and contrast Carson 2012).

Despite the fact that the dilemma argument, as just described, is much cited, there is an obvious problem with it, given the views of contemporary meta-ethicists. Look again at the first horn of the dilemma. It falsely assumes that if God has a reason for desiring that people act in the way that is supposed to be obligatory, then the only plausible candidate for that reason could be that it is independently obligatory for them to act in that way. But, as we have seen, God's reason for desiring that people act in that way could be the non-ethical way the world would be if people were to act in that way. This, to repeat, is the sort of view that is taken by many contemporary meta-ethicists. The non-ethical way the world would be if people were to act in the way that it is obligatory for them to act provides everyone, God and other people too, with a reason to desire that the world be that way, and it is obligatory that people act in that way because there is this reason for them to desire that the world be this way. No circularity there.

Far from undermining the Divine Will Theory, it might therefore be thought that the views of contemporary meta-ethicists provide defenders of the theory with all the materials they need in order to defend it against the objection based on the *Euthyphro* dilemma. If God exists, where God is understood to be the all-good, all-knowing, all-powerful creator of everything, then God's being all-good could only consist in his being fully sensitive to all of the reasons that there are in the formation of his desires. If God's will is a matter of what he desires, and God would only have desires if there are reasons for them, then it seems that it will indeed be obligatory for people to act in a certain way if and only if and because God wills them to act in that way. This is just the Divine Will Theory. So, at any rate, it might be thought.

Unfortunately for the defenders of the Divine Will Theory, however, the argument just given for the theory has a false premise. If God is all-good, all that follows is that he has no desires that there are reasons *for him not to have*, not that he only has desires that there are reasons *for him to have*. He could still have all sorts of whims about how people are to act based on no reason at all, and these could be whims that we have no reasons to satisfy out of respect for him. These whims would be part of his will but, for the reasons given earlier, it would be implausible to suppose that God's having these whims gives rise to obligations. God's whims don't obligate God, and they don't obligate others either, if satisfying them isn't a way of showing him respect. So there is still a residual problem with the Divine Will Theory, even as revised in the light of the views made salient by contemporary meta-ethicists.

Of course, it might be thought that this problem with the Divine Will Theory also suggests how it should be revised so as to make it more plausible. It needs to restrict God's willings to desires for which there are reasons. Imagine a variation on the Divine Will Theory that is so restricted. According to this view, which we might call the Divine Rational Will Theory, people are obliged to act in a certain way if and only if and because God wills them so to act *on the basis of reasons*. If God exists, as understood above, then is this theory true? The answer is that it is not true, but the explanation of why it isn't true is a little more complicated. It also turns on an assumption about the nature of the reasons that there are to act. Let me explain.

So far we have been working with a specific example of an obligatory act: the obligation everyone has to do what they can to provide people with the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing. This obligation provides what's called a *neutral* reason to act. The reason is neutral because it is grounded in a reason everyone has to desire that the *same* state of affairs comes about, namely, the state of affairs in which people have the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing. But – and this is the assumption mentioned above – not all obligations

provide neutral reasons to act. Some provide what are called *relative* reasons, where relative reasons are reasons everyone has to desire that *different* states of affairs obtain. Relative reasons make trouble for the Divine Rational Will Theory.

Consider the obligation each of us has not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing on condition that their leading that life doesn't preclude others from doing so as well – from here on I will ignore the complicated condition. This obligation provides each of us with a relative reason to act because the reason is grounded in a reason each of us has to desire that a *different* state of affairs obtains: *I* have a reason to desire that the state of affairs in which *I* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing obtains; *you* have a reason to desire that the state of affairs in which *you* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing obtains; and so on. These relative reasons are natural counterparts to the neutral reason we all have to do what we can to provide people with the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing. Part of what might be required to do, given the neutral reason, is to try to persuade others not to interfere with people, and perhaps even that we join together and institute a system of laws that prevents people from engaging in flagrant acts of interference. But acts of both these kinds would need to be constrained by a special reason each of us has to ensure that *we* do not interfere ourselves. That's the obligation to which the relative reason gives rise.

Note that both neutral and relative reasons are universal. *Everyone* has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which people lead lives of their own choosing, and *everyone* has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which *they* don't interfere. The difference between the neutral and relative reasons doesn't lie in the fact that one is universal and the other isn't, but rather in what there is universal reason to desire. The relative reason provides everyone with a reason to desire a state of affairs whose characterization requires ineliminable mention of the person who has the desire: everyone has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which *they* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. This isn't true of the neutral reason. The neutral reason provides everyone with a reason to desire a state of affairs that we can characterize without mentioning the person who has the desire. Everyone has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which people lead lives of their own choosing. To the extent that desirers with this desire have a desire about themselves, it is only about themselves in virtue of the fact that they count as one of the people. This isn't true of the relative reason.

We are now in a position to state the problem with the Divine Rational Will Theory. What makes it the case that people have obligations that give rise to *relative* reasons to act, according to this theory? For example, what makes it the case that people have an obligation not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing? According to the Divine Rational Will Theory, this is obligatory if and only if and because God wills that people act in this way on the basis of reasons. But if God's will is a matter of God's desires, then this amounts to the claim that what makes such acts obligatory is the fact that God has a desire that *people* do not interfere, where this desire is based on reasons. Yet this can't be what makes it obligatory, as this would make the obligation give rise to a neutral reason rather than a relative reason. If there really were a reason to desire that *people* not interfere, then not only God, but all of us would have reason to desire that people not interfere. We might even be willing to interfere ourselves if that were a way of getting fewer people to interfere. This plainly isn't a relative reason.

So what does ground the obligation not to interfere? The answer is that the obligation is grounded in the fact that everyone, God included, has a reason to desire the state of affairs in which *they* don't interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. This means that if God's will is based on reasons, God's will would have to be restricted to *his own* acts on non-interference. His own rational will could therefore ground his own obligation not to interfere,

but it couldn't ground the obligation that others have not to interfere. The ground of others' obligations would instead have to be facts about what *they* would desire, based on reasons, if *they* were fully sensitive to the reasons that there are for desiring. This is a flat out denial of the Divine Rational Will Theory. It amounts to the secular view that people have an obligation not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing if and only if and because they themselves would have a desire, based on reasons, that the state of affairs in which they don't interfere obtains if their desires were fully sensitive to the reasons there are for desiring. For obvious reasons, let's call this the Rational Will Theory.

According to the Rational Will Theory, God's will has no special role to play in the existence of the obligation that gives rise to a relative reason. God's rational will grounds the obligation that God has not to interfere, but it doesn't ground the obligation you have, or I have, not to interfere, as our obligations are grounded in facts about *our* rational wills. But if a secular view like this is needed in order to account for the existence of obligations that give rise to relative reasons, then we should suppose on grounds of simplicity that that same secular view accounts for the existence of obligations that give rise to neutral reasons. Why does everyone have an obligation to do what they can to provide people with the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing? Everyone has this obligation if and only if and because everyone would have a desire based on reasons that the state of affairs in which people have the opportunity to lead lives of their own choosing obtains if *their* desires were fully sensitive to the reasons there are for desiring. God's will thus has no special role to play in the existence of the obligation that gives rise to neutral reasons either. The Rational Will Theory is thus preferable to the Divine Rational Will Theory. God's will has no special role to play in the existence of obligations beyond his own.

In its most general form the Rational Will Theory tells us that people have an obligation to act in a certain way if and only if and because they would have a desire, based on reasons, that the state of affairs that results from their acting in that way obtains if their desires were fully sensitive to reasons. Since in order to be fully sensitive to reasons people would have to have knowledge of all the relevant non-ethical facts, it might be thought that the Rational Will Theory in effect says that people have an obligation to act in a certain way if and only if and because they would desire themselves to act in that way if they were God-like. The *idea* of God might therefore be thought to be relevant to the concept of an obligation, even if the *existence* of God is not. It is, however, important to note this is not so either. The Rational Will Theory does not entail that our obligations are fixed by facts about what we are like in possible worlds in which we are God-like.

To be sure, the Rational Will Theory does make the existence of ethical facts contingent on there being possible worlds in which our desires are fully sensitive to reasons and we know all of the relevant non-ethical facts. But this is not to imagine ourselves as being God-like. God is also the all-powerful creator of everything. According to the Rational Will Theory, by contrast, the ground of people's obligations lies in the desires they would have in possible worlds in which, for all that the Rational Will Theory tells us, they could be the weakest person in that world. People may thus be very far from being God-like in the possible worlds in which the Rational Will Theory tells us that their desires ground their obligations. For example, it is plainly a contingent fact that our desires are fully sensitive to reasons and that we know all the relevant non-ethical facts in the worlds that ground our obligations. There are plenty of possible worlds, the actual world being prominent among them, in which we are ignorant, and our desires are not sensitive to reasons. God, by contrast, is *essentially* such that he has knowledge and desires that are sensitive to reasons. We are no more God-like in the possible worlds in which our desires and knowledge ground our obligations than we are in the actual world.

Let's now turn from variations on the Divine Will Theory to the Divine Command Theory. According to the Divine Command Theory, people are obliged to act in a certain way if and only if and because God commands them to act in that way. It might be thought that all of the reasons that have been given for supposing that various versions of the Divine Will Theory are implausible will carry over and show that the Divine Command Theory is implausible as well. If our obligations don't depend on God's existence, they can't depend on God's commands either. In fact, however, this thought is mistaken. Because commands can have normative significance in their own right, a significance that willings lack, a revised version of the Divine Command Theory might still be plausible. To see why this is so, consider three very different contexts in which commands have normative significance in their own right.

Imagine a parent walking along a city street with a young child. The child blows his nose and throws his tissue on the ground. Imagine that the city employs street sweepers and that this is a matter of common knowledge between the parent and the child: perhaps a street sweeper is in plain view in the distance. Even so, it is easy to imagine the parent believing that the child has an independent reason to pick up the tissue and put it in the trashcan, and that the best or even only way to get him to act in accordance with this reason in the circumstances is by commanding him to do so. Does the parent's command have independent normative significance in this situation? That depends on whether the parent merely takes himself to be a legitimate authority, in Joseph Raz's sense, or whether he really is such an authority (Raz 1986).

The parent really is a legitimate authority, in Raz's sense, if two conditions are satisfied. The first is that she has the power to issue commands that will have a certain effect. She is in a position to get the child to ignore the reasons that he thought he had for acting in this situation, reasons to do with his own convenience, and to pick up the tissue merely because of her say-so: the power to make the child forgo weighing his parent's say-so against his own reasons of convenience, and instead to take her say-so as pre-empting any consideration of reasons of his own convenience. This would be for the parent to have the power to make the child treat the reason provided by her command as an *exclusionary* reason, in Raz's sense. The second condition is that the parent and child satisfy what Raz calls the 'normal justification thesis':

The normal way to establish that a person has authority over another involves showing that the alleged subject is likely to better comply with the reasons which apply to him (other than the alleged authoritative directive) if he accepts the directives of the alleged authority as authoritatively binding and tries to follow them, rather than by trying to follow the reasons which apply to him directly.

(Raz 1986: 53)

In other words, the parent is a legitimate authority only if, in addition to her having the power in question, the child satisfies a certain condition as well. The child must be more likely to do what he has reasons to do by obeying his parent's command than he would merely by doing what he thinks he has reasons to do. If these two conditions are satisfied, then not only does the child treat the reason provided by the parent's command as an exclusionary reason, it really is an exclusionary reason.

It is easy to imagine that the condition specified in normal justification thesis is satisfied in the case of the parent and the child. The reason not to drop trash on city streets when the city employs street sweepers requires some sophistication and subtlety to appreciate. The street sweepers are not there to clean up everyone's trash, but only the trash left by those who don't recognize that everyone has an independent reason not to drop trash, a reason that is in turn grounded in the reason we all have to do our fair share in the maintenance of a pleasant

environment in which to live. Needless to say, the child we are imagining may well lack the sophistication required to appreciate such a sophisticated and subtle reason, even though he is sufficiently sophisticated to appreciate that his parent is a legitimate authority on the matter of reasons created by her commands. If so, then when the child picks up the tissue and puts it in the trash, he acts on a reason, namely, the fact that his parent issued an authoritative command, and, by acting on this reason, he thereby better acts on the reasons that apply to him, in particular, the reason to do his fair share in the maintenance of a pleasant environment in which to live.

The situation involving the parent and the child just described is parallel to the situation some people think human beings are in with respect to God's commands. God is like the parent and we are like the child. Their idea is that, since God is fully sensitive to all of the reasons that there are, but we aren't, God is in a better position than we are to know what we have independent reason to do and hence what our obligations are. Since God is in this position of superior knowledge, it therefore follows that we would do a better job of acting on our independent reasons by simply obeying the commands he issues to us, and this is sufficient to make his commands authoritative for us. Moreover, since we are in a position to know that God knows what we have reason to do, and hence that his commands are authoritative, we can also know that his commands are authoritative, and hence that they provide us with reasons to act, even while admitting that we aren't in a position to know what God's reasons are for issuing those commands. Would an account of our obligations along these lines, assuming for a moment that its various empirical claims are true, be sufficient to prove the truth of the Divine Command Theory?

According to the Divine Command Theory, people are obliged to act in a certain way if and only if and because God commands them to act in that way. An initial problem with the Divine Command Theory, so formulated, should be immediately apparent when it is defended in the way just suggested. Since the defence assumes that we are in a worse position to know what we have reason to do than God, it gets no purchase at all in those possible worlds in which we are in as good a position as God to know what we have reason to do. Consider, for example, those possible worlds in which we are fully sensitive to all of the reasons that there are. In those possible worlds, God has no reason to issue any commands to us, so in those worlds our obligations are grounded directly in the desires we have that are based on reasons. The correct story of our obligations, in those possible worlds, is the Rational Will Theory. The 'only if' part of the Divine Command Theory is thus false. At best a revised version of the Divine Command Theory is plausible, one that restricts itself to making the sufficiency claim. We have an obligation if God commands us. This version of the theory doesn't make the existence of obligations depend on God's existence.

Once we fully digest this initial problem, however, a deeper problem with even this watered down version of the Divine Command Theory emerges. The problem is not so much meta-physical, as epistemological. Why should we suppose that the actual world is a world in which God must issue commands to us if we are to do what we have reason to do? Is it true that God is in a better position to know what we have reason to do than we are ourselves? It would seem not. One of the main achievements of the Enlightenment was to show that though knowledge of reasons is beyond infants and the mentally infirm, it is well within the grasp of adults. Enlightenment figures demonstrated this, more or less successfully, by giving arguments for various substantive claims about what we have reason to do. Moreover, when rigorously pursued, many of these arguments support substantive views in the ballpark of the two principles we have assumed to be correct here (see for example Rawls 1971, Scanlon 1998, Hooker 2000, Parfit 2011). This is not to deny that adults can disagree with each other about what they have reason to do, but the mere fact that there is disagreement about reasons doesn't show that one of the parties to that disagreement lacks knowledge any more than disagreement about

mathematics, or economics, shows that neither party to a disagreement has knowledge. The deeper problem with the Divine Command Theory, when it is motivated by the need to think of ourselves as having childlike epistemic powers, is thus that it is predicated on a claim about the limitations of our epistemic powers that we have no reason to believe is true.

Consider now a second sort of context in which commands have normative significance in their own right. Let's continue with the assumption that we have reason to desire two things: that people be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing, and that we do not interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. How are we to see to it that we do what's required for people to be given the opportunity to live a life of their own choosing? One possibility would be for each of us to do what we believe would lead to that outcome. But since there are many things we could do that would lead to this outcome, and since the success of many of these requires the cooperation of others, it is crucial, if we are to do what is required, that we coordinate our efforts. If we don't coordinate, we would be at cross-purposes, and many of our efforts would be in vain. But when there are several equally good options, how is such coordination to be brought about? One answer is that God could pick one of the equally good alternatives and then command us all to pursue that one. Now imagine that this is the only, or if not the only then the most efficient, way for us to coordinate. Raz's normal justification thesis would come into play. God's commands would be authoritative in virtue of their coordinating role.

Note that a defence of the Divine Command Theory along these lines would once again only show that we have obligations *if* God commands us, not *only if* he commands us. Since not all obligations require us to coordinate with others, God would have no reason to issue commands on matters that do not require coordination, so these obligations would exist, but wouldn't be grounded in God's commands. But even this more restricted sufficiency claim seems unlikely to be true. The claim that we lack the ability, absent God's commands, to coordinate our efforts in the way required to do what we have reason to do seems to be false. Think of all the coordination that goes on without God's apparently having any view on the matter: the members of orchestras manage to play together, sports teams manage to compete with each other, kitchen workers in large restaurants manage to prepare multiple meals in a timely fashion, the fashion industry manages to design, create and sell new looks year-in, year-out, and so we could go on. To my knowledge, no one thinks God has issued commands on these matters. Nor does the claim that God's issuing a command is the most efficient way to get us to coordinate seem to be true either. How could having to deal with an extra layer of doctrinal disagreement concerning God's existence, and the content of the commands he issues, be more efficient for the purposes of coordination than the more pragmatic methods, whatever they might happen to be, employed by musicians, those involved in sports, restaurants, and the fashion industry?

Consider, finally, a third sort of context in which commands have normative significance in their own right. Focus this time on the reason to desire that we do not interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing. What, precisely, do we have reason to desire? There is, after all, a continuous series of actions in between touching someone harmlessly and battering them, and at some point in this series we cross the boundary between determinately not interfering with them and determinately interfering with them. The boundary between non-interference and interference is thus vague. This means that if we are each to be in a position to know when others have acted towards us in a way that we know and they know that they have reason not to do, something that is crucial if we are to police each other's behaviour, then we need to have a shared understanding of how the concept of interference is to be precisified. How is this precisification to be achieved? God's commands might once again provide the answer. The

argument for the Divine Command Theory would then proceed much as it did in the previous cases, but this time the crucial empirical claim would be that God's commands provide us with the only, or if not the only then the most efficient, means by which to precisify what we have reason to do in the ways needed if we are to police each other.

Unsurprisingly, the problem with this attempt to defend the Divine Command Theory is much the same as that with the previous defence. God's commands aren't needed to ground our obligations in cases in which our reasons are determinate, so at best this provides us with a defence of a version of the Divine Command Theory that abandons the necessity claim and restricts itself to the sufficiency claim. However, the crucial empirical claim needed to defend even this restricted version of the theory seems also to be false. We evidently do not lack the ability, absent God's commands, to precisify what we have reason to do in the ways required to police ourselves. There is, after all, vagueness in what musicians, those involved in sports, cooking, and the fashion industry have reason to do too, and yet they manage to reach an agreed precisification of what they have reason to do, to the extent necessary for them to police each other, without any help from God. Moreover their more pragmatic methods of precisification, whatever they are, would seem to be more efficient than those that require us to iron out the extra layer of doctrinal disagreement concerning God's existence, and the content of the commands that he issues.

Let me sum up the discussion. We have considered various views according to which our ethical obligations depend upon, or are grounded in, God's existence, and we have evaluated these views in the light of claims about the nature of our ethical obligations that are widely accepted by contemporary meta-ethicists. Some of these views – versions of the Divine Will Theory – have turned out to be conceptually confused, though not for the reasons philosophers have usually thought. Others – versions of the Divine Command Theory – have turned out not to be conceptually confused, but to depend on empirical claims that I have suggested we have no reason to accept. This is important, as it shows that there is no deep tension between the views of contemporary meta-ethicists and those who accept these versions of the Divine Command Theory. Moreover, since others might disagree with my assessment of the empirical facts, the arguments given against these versions of the Divine Command Theory are by their nature more controversial. Weak versions of the Divine Command Theory are far more plausible than many contemporary ethicists have thought.

Finally, what should we make of the idea that, if God exists, then our having a relationship with him would be one of the most important things in our lives? What has been said here suggests that, even if this conditional claim is true, the choice whether to have such a relationship is severely constrained on all sides by our ethical obligations. If, as we have been assuming, each and every one of us, including God if he exists, has reasons not to interfere with anyone's leading a life of their own choosing and to do what we can to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to lead such a life, then those who believe that God exists, and who choose to have a relationship with him, would seem committed to the conclusion that those who don't believe, and so choose not to have such a relationship, are ethically permitted to make that choice, and others are ethically obliged to let them make it. Ethics, it seems, is secular through and through.

RELIGION AND NORMATIVE ETHICS

David S. Oderberg

Introduction

It is an incontestable truth that, for the vast majority of human beings, throughout all of recorded human history, morality and religion have gone hand in hand. It is also the case that, as far back as the dawn of philosophy around the sixth century BCE, there have been movements we would now describe as atheist, secularist, or humanist, that have affirmed both the possibility of an ethical system and particular ethical principles as the content of that system.

These latter schools of thought are now very much at the forefront of both public discourse and academic debate, due in significant measure to the influence of what are sometimes called the ‘New Atheists’. (See, for example: Dennett 2006; Dawkins 2006a; Hitchens 2007.) The idea of a religion-free, purely secular morality might still be a minority view if we take the opinion of everyone on the planet into consideration, but it is by no means to be regarded as outlandish or confined to a niche of professional philosophers or fashionable thinkers. Here we have a portentous fault line for religion in its conflict with secularism: for if morality does not require a religious foundation, what is probably religion’s strongest claim to adherence on the human mind is fatally undercut. A religious believer might offer a slew of metaphysical arguments for the existence of God, and at least one of them might be unassailable, even persuading an intellectually-minded person to be or become a theist. The task of developing such arguments – and, for the atheist, refuting them if they can – might be of immense importance for the cause of truth and understanding. The fact is, however, that for most religious believers – even, I hazard, for religious believers who are professional academics – the dominant thought when pondering the possible non-existence of God and falsity of all religions is: ‘And what about right and wrong?’

It is as well to set out immediately what I propose to do in the remainder of this chapter, and what I will studiously avoid, whether for the sake of simplicity or for lack of space. First, I will not discuss the Problem of Evil, which requires a full treatment of its own. Second, I will not make a distinction between belief in God and adherence to a religion. Buddhism, of course, is a classic example of a religion without belief in a deity, and one could fruitfully analyse the connection between religion and morality in terms of such systems. Instead, I will confine myself to classical monotheism, taking Christianity – itself understood traditionally – as the paradigm. In other words, I will take religion to have belief in God, traditionally understood, at

its core, and the believer in God to be a person who adheres to some form of classical monotheism. Third, I will confine myself to a set of what I consider to be key questions in the contemporary debate – both inside and outside the academy – concerning the relation between religion and morality.

Fourth, I will not discuss what are generally held to be meta-ethical issues, such as whether the so-called divine command theory of morality is true. One could argue that divine command theory is not only about meta-ethics: just as there is the second-order thought that what it is for an act, say, to be morally obligatory is for it to be commanded by God, so there is the first-order idea that to find out just *what* is morally obligatory one needs to consult the divine injunctions. This latter is not of much interest, at least for my purposes. For even if the content of morality were to be found in the book of divine commands, as it were, this would not advance understanding of what it is about the *content* of those commands that made them the fit subject of divine injunction. To say this is not to take a stand on the Euthyphro problem: a command may be fit for God to make not because its content adheres to a standard external to God in some appropriate sense, but because its fitness is logically necessitated by God's own internal nature. Still, it does presuppose that any sensible divine command theory would have to rule out the sort of extreme voluntarism according to which a command is fit for God to make just because He makes it – if this is even a coherent notion. Moreover, divine command theory obviously presupposes the existence of God, whereas my purpose is to investigate whether a proper understanding of morality should lead us in a theistic direction. Finally, and even apart from questions of inconsistency between commands held to be divine and yet belonging to different creeds, we need to be reminded that God is held to have commanded many things – specific deeds, ceremonial and ritualistic actions, social and political arrangements – many of which, even if moral in content, apply to particular times and places rather than embodying universal principles of the type we take to be foundational to morality. If we want an informative account of the latter, we cannot merely appeal to the fact of their having been commanded.

That said, and without any pretence to exhaustiveness, I want to look at a few of the central issues that either do, or ought to, animate current debate about religion and morality.

The moral grip

It is common for texts setting out arguments for the existence of God to include what is sometimes called the 'moral argument'. (See, for example, Copan 2003.) The argument usually focuses on the claim that objective moral values require a divine guarantor of their objectivity, there being no alternative (or at least superior) explanation in terms of, say, reason or nature. Whilst the argument deserves serious consideration, it can be fleshed out in different ways and also met with various rebuttals. For instance, if mere objectivity is the explanandum, one might as well argue for the same conclusion from the objectivity of anything – the physical world, mathematics, logic. Either the argument form is too promiscuous, or the moral argument is no more than a species of some broader genus of argument that has to be assessed in general terms. The same applies to the necessity of moral truths, if – as I assume – some are indeed necessary when formulated appropriately: witness again mathematics and logic. One could say the same about the universality and absoluteness of moral truths (non-relativity), their entrenchment in belief systems across time, space, culture, circumstance; and so on.

A more interesting, and perhaps promising, line of thought concerns the hold of morality upon our lives. There does seem to be something peculiar – in the non-pejorative sense of the term – about morality. It has a grip on us that no other system of truths or principles even approaches. When we think about what we must or must not do in moral terms, it is

impossible not to think of demands made on us – demands to do or refrain from something (to be kind to someone in need in the former case, for example, or to refrain from cheating on an exam in the latter). We need not think of the demand as a command: friends, children, and others make demands on us without commanding anything. But the demand nevertheless is strongly felt. It is more than the recognition of someone's desire that you do (not do) something, and it goes beyond any felt urge. Even those who pronounce themselves sceptics or anti-realists of some stripe cannot deny that they too feel the pull of the moral rope upon them personally, and it may even be something that they try – with superficial plausibility – to incorporate into their meta-ethic. In this sense, the grip of the normative undermines the embrace of any second-order perspective that does not or will not accommodate it.

The moral grip is one aspect of the demand morality makes on us. The other is what we might call its pervasiveness. Although it might at first sound strange to contemporary ears – though it would have been a commonplace even a century ago – every action we perform is a moral matter. Morality is like the air we breathe inasmuch as we do not notice its presence until circumstance makes us pay attention. How could this be? How could humming a tune on my way to work or deciding to blow my nose with a white tissue rather than a blue one be a moral matter? What we fail to realize is that the vast bulk of what we do is *morally permissible*. Choosing ice cream rather than mousse for dessert is (the ever-necessary 'all things being equal' assumed) what we might call 'morally indifferent' – not because it is outside morality, but because morality itself neither forbids nor enjoins it. Once we remember that moral permissibility is as much a normative category as being obligatory or forbidden (as well as advisable, admirable, and so on for all the other shades of moral predication), we can see immediately the pervasiveness of morality in the life of every person. That we are not prompted by the stirrings of conscience to consider the permissible things we do as permissible, that we do not reason about them, says everything about (hopefully correct) instinct and education and nothing about these things' being beyond the moral reach.

It might be thought that the world itself and all the truth in it is similarly demanding and pervasive: we have to believe what is true and disbelieve what is false (for the most part at least) not merely because of the consequences of doing otherwise, but because we feel the instinctive tug of truth and repulsion of falsehood, both of which also pervade our lives. But the pull of truth just is, I submit, a moral one: we morally ought to believe the true (and disbelieve the false). Knowledge, as natural law theorists among others affirm, is a basic human good, and so *ipso facto* something we are morally bound to pursue in all its forms (though not at all costs, unless – implausibly – it is the *only* good). Many would object that there is a *rational* imperative here, not a moral one: but again, there is an overriding *moral* duty to be rational, that is, to use our epistemic faculties in the right way. Not only would the cultivation of irrationality be as morally blameworthy as eating purely for the sake of regurgitating, but it would undermine the very foundation upon which any other moral behaviour, including relations with others, can be founded.

As well as being uniquely demanding and pervasive, morality is what some writers have called 'inescapable'. In other words, it is not something an agent can opt out of. To be sure, someone could decide to opt out of being moral in the sense of devoting themselves to a life of wicked deeds, but that no more removes them from the moral reach than deciding to live an unhealthy life removes them from the reach of health. A person could also choose to be a 'moral nihilist', thinking that morality did not matter to them, or should not matter to anyone, because it is an illusion; but that would hardly prevent it from mattering. Likewise if a person considered themselves 'above' morality. Thinking you are a superman does not make you one, nor does covering your ears and speaking loudly make difficult truths go away.

Philippa Foot (1978/2002: 163) has objected that the idea of the ‘inescapability’ of morality – the context being a discussion of Kant and the demands of the categorical imperative – might be an illusion: we may *feel* compelled to be moral because of good upbringing and education, without believing we are under – let alone being under – any sort of compulsion. Bernard Williams (1985/2006: 177), using the same terminology, takes inescapability to be an essential feature of what he calls the ‘morality system’, which he finds ‘peculiar’ (in the pejorative sense) because of its unhealthy focus on reducing all moral considerations to obligations (to do or refrain from something). Yet we can disentangle inescapability from reductivism about morality and obligation and also from considerations about education and upbringing. As I noted, when it comes to all the permissible things in life, of course we do not generally feel a pull in any direction: that’s part of what it *is* for something to be permissible. But if pressed – ‘Who do you think you are, using a blue handkerchief?’ – we will stand on our rights, and even if *we* do not feel a pull or push in terms of our own behaviour, we certainly do feel our *challenger* being pushed away, and insist they should feel the same. So although a person acting permissibly may not feel a force on themselves, they do, as it were, feel a force on *others*; and this is what we should expect from pervasiveness. The project to reduce morality to a system of obligations, then, is distinct from the insistence on its inescapability. And while it is true that training does account psychologically for *some* of the tug we feel, it cannot account for it all, unless Foot wants to reduce the moulding of conscience into pure brainwashing, which I doubt. Education always works on pre-existing materials, and the reflexive, instinctive knowledge we have – even if only at a fairly gross and basic level – of the rightness and wrongness of certain behaviour provides the unique bedrock on which education can work in the first place.

Suppose morality to have a pervasive grip on our lives. What then? A theist will find purely naturalistic explanations of no avail. We have many needs and urges – to survive, to eat and sleep, protect ourselves from harm, to reproduce, and so on. We can, for the sake of argument, grant a wholly naturalistic account of where these needs and urges come from: we are ‘hard-wired’ this way due to the pressures of nature, the blind yet guiding hand (if this make sense) of evolutionary forces. Yet although we feel urges and needs to behave according to the dictates of morality as well, and although the urges and needs may themselves have a naturalistic explanation (which I for one doubt), we cannot account for the *demands* of morality in this way. This is something proponents of an evolutionary account of the moral life have a difficult time explaining. (See Ruse 1986/1995, for example, who speaks of the ‘dictates of our conscience’ (99), and seeks to explain our moral sense in evolutionary terms, without similarly accounting for the demands morality *itself* makes on us.) Needless to say, a full defence of my position is impossible here, requiring as it would a detailed elimination of naturalistic alternatives and fleshing out of my characterization of morality. What I propose here, however, is more akin to moral phenomenology: if we do take the characteristics of the moral grip as seriously as I suggest we should, then we ought, without further ado, to reconsider the kind of metaphysic that would appropriately underlie it.

What is distinctive of the moral grip is that it feels as if it comes from outside us, even if only remotely via the stirrings of inner conscience. The thought that where a demand is made of us, there must be an agency (let us call it) *making* the demand transcends the truism that we respond morally to external facts or circumstances. The drowning man flailing helplessly need not demand anything of us, for he may not even know we are watching him from the shore. The situation, we say, demands a response, but I take ‘demands’ here to be synonymous with ‘requires/needs’. If I am on the shore, I feel a demand to help, but it would seem strange were I to think that the situation *itself* demands anything, let alone anything of me in particular. There is nothing Humean in this way of looking at it – no endorsement here of the thought that ‘[it]

is not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger' (Hume 1739–40/1978: 416). Rather, the genuine fact that the situation, by its very nature, is one involving a person's requiring help – in the sense of needing it – is distinct from the putative fact that the situation *requires me* – in the sense of *making a demand on me* – to give it. The situation contains intrinsic normative features, and these appeal directly to my reason as motivators of action; but this can all be true without my feeling any pull, from outside me, to act in accordance with a correct order of things. The Stoic Chrysippus (279–206 BC) famously spoke of acting in accord with a 'right reason' that is identical with the 'common law' (by which he meant moral law) of mankind, which 'pervades everything', and which he further identified with Zeus, 'lord and ruler of all that is' (Laetius c. 300 BCE/1925, sec. 88, 195–97). He may have been wrong to identify Zeus, but that he did not stop short at mere reason, linking it instead to a personal agency that could by its nature make demands of us, is a thought many theists continue to take seriously.

Self-interest and moral motivation

It is common, especially since Kant, to divorce morality from self-interest. More precisely, self-interest cannot be, insofar as praise and blame are concerned, the sole motive of moral behaviour, nor can it be a necessary one. It might be widely present, contingently, as a mover of moral behaviour, and so much the better if it causes more people to be good than otherwise. Most ethicists, even Kantians, would not go as far as Kant in holding that no other motive than acting from pure duty contributes to what is sometimes called the 'moral worth' of an action (Kant 1785/1993, first section). Moral worth might come from motives of sympathy, love, and the inner joy of being virtuous – but that self-interest can be a motive contributing to moral worth seems as repellent as it did to Kant.

Most religions, on the other hand, hold there to be an ultimate reckoning in the afterlife, according to which the good are rewarded and the bad are punished. (For an overview of some major traditions, see Eliade 1987: 237–43.) This is not supposed to be a mere accident of living a virtuous/vicious life, but essentially connected to doing so. Moreover, the thought of such a reckoning is supposed to *move* people to the right kind of behaviour. To take a typical example from the Old Testament, in the Book of Daniel (12:2) we have: 'many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some unto life everlasting, and others unto reproach, to see it always.' And from the New Testament, we have Jesus saying: 'And these [the unjust] shall go into everlasting punishment: but the just, into life everlasting' (Matt. 25:46). It is commonly thought that Plato (and probably Socrates) held that 'virtue is its own reward': if this means that the only benefit to come out of being good is simply being good, then the thought is mistaken. In the *Gorgias* (523a–527e), Plato sets out a vision of a kind of Last Judgment, in which the just souls go to the Isles of the Blessed and the unjust to Tartarus, and the Myth of Er in his *Republic* tells a similar story (Book 10: 614–21). But even if we discount these narratives, virtue as the health of the soul is central to Platonic thought – something which involves more than the idea that being good is a reward in itself.

George Mavrodes (1986/2008) has argued that morality – taken to include obligations that are objective, demanding, and pervade our lives – could not exist in a world he calls 'Russellian', after the famous description by Bertrand Russell in 'The Free Man's Worship' (1903/1999). There, Russell describes our world as governed by impersonal forces, made of 'accidental collocations of atoms', and providing only a 'firm foundation of unyielding despair' on which to build our lives. Such a world, for Mavrodes, would be 'absurd ... crazy' (2008: 581) given that these demanding, all-pervasive obligations often yield no 'Russellian benefit' and even a 'net

Russellian loss' – whatever material benefits and losses could accrue to us in a materialistic and ultimately meaningless universe. The details of Mavrodes's argument aside, the thought is compelling to most theists, and moves Mavrodes himself to advocate religion (in particular, Christianity) as overlaying our material world with an economy of judgment and salvation. If morality is as I have described it earlier, would not a world without ultimate reward for being good (and punishment for being bad) be absurd? To be sure, this is just what an atheistic existentialist holds if they take morality to be as I have characterized it. Yet might this not reflect a prejudice rather than reasoned argument? After all, the physical universe displays order and coherence according to immutable laws of nature: we do not expect, nor do we think it the case, that the laws (even probabilistic ones) operate in a systematic fashion only to dissolve into utter chaos every so often. It is not what we experience, nor is it a methodological assumption of natural science.

Yet a parallel point could be made about the moral life. First, consider all the demands morality makes of us, constraining and directing our behaviour in uncountable ways. We should develop our characters in certain directions rather than others. We must respect the rights of our fellows, thus limiting quite severely our freedom to act. We should behave in accordance with a host of virtues, not merely in our external acts, but speaking and even thinking in certain ways as opposed to others. Consider what we *could* do if moral nihilism were true, for instance, compared to what we *can* do given an objective, demanding, pervasive, and inescapable morality. Second, set all of this against the realization that there is frequently no correlation whatsoever between acting morally and how our lives go in terms of earthly benefits. Often there is a *reverse* correlation. ('No good deed goes unpunished', as the old saying has it.) To religious believers this looks like a crazy mismatch, akin to the laws of nature going haywire every so often; or better, to the laws of nature being perfectly coherent until the very threshold of a final explanation (the longed-for 'theory of everything', if there is one), at which point all descends into chaos. In other words, not only should we expect there to be an ultimate point to natural science, but in the 'science of living well', as it were, theists expect there to be a point – one that goes beyond simply being good for its own sake.

Suppose there were an evil demon ruling the universe, who implanted the moral conscience in us but only as a game for his own sadistic motive: if we live a good life, the demon tortures us for eternity, and if we live a vicious and evil life, he rewards us with eternal bliss. We might well think, if we knew this to be the case, and we took morality seriously all the same, that being moral – for all its fist-shaking defiance in the face of adversity – was in a higher sense a pointless and futile game. And if we did not know anything about such an evil demon, we certainly would not – and do not – *expect* this ultimate perversity to await us at the end of our lives. Now this does not prove that we should (let alone do) expect a more positive point and outcome to follow upon a virtuous life, but perhaps it reveals what many of us do hope for – that as the most serious thing in our lives, morality should also involve serious stakes. If a Russellian world, in which our virtuous behaviour vanishes like a point in the infinite expanse of the universe, of no more significance than the most reprehensibly lived life of vice, is not as frightening a prospect as that of the sadistic and perverse demon, it is – so religious adherents generally think – equally appalling. The only apparent way of lifting the pall is to take it that some sort of ultimate happiness awaits those who dedicate their lives to the good. Clearly, though, if those who fasten themselves to a life of evil share as well in this happiness, we are not far away from the demon. Presumably, then, the latter are destined for a life of unhappiness. They do not always – not often enough, in fact – experience such a life on earth. So they must meet it somewhere else. If this sort of economy is the case, then it just is one in which there is an ultimate reckoning – reward and punishment meted out appropriately – awaiting all of us.

To what extent is this line of thinking the same as Kant's, who regarded the existence of God as a 'postulate' of practical reason? (See Kant 1788/1898: 220–29.) For Kant, the '*summum bonum*' (highest good) has two elements – morality and happiness. Morality is the 'perfect accordance of the will with the moral law', which he also calls 'holiness' (ibid. 218). Happiness is 'the condition of a rational being in the world with whom everything goes according to his wish and will' (ibid. 221). The latter looks rather like happiness defined as getting whatever you want – as long as you respect the moral law, of course. That idiosyncratic definition aside, Kant's view is that the *summum bonum* does not merely consist of these two elements, but they have to be in harmony – happiness proportioned to virtue. But for a being living in the world, there is no necessary connection between virtue and happiness – something with which we are all too familiar. Nevertheless, as far as 'pure' practical reason is concerned, such a connection must exist, if not in this world then in an afterlife (hence Kant's additional postulate of the immortality of the soul). Why? This is where it gets a little tricky, because Kant says that 'we ought to endeavour to promote the *summum bonum*, which, therefore, must be possible' (ibid. 221). He goes on: 'Accordingly, the existence of a cause of all nature, distinct from nature itself, and containing the principle of this connexion, namely, of the exact harmony of happiness with morality, is also *postulated*' (op. cit.; emphasis in original). Pure practical reason, then, must postulate the existence of a supreme being, outside nature, who sees to it that the rational agent's morality is proportioned to his happiness.

The penultimate quotation, however, is ambiguous: What must be possible – the highest good or its promotion/pursuit? (The original German seems ambiguous as well, though there is room for debate: the translations in Kant (1788/1898) and Kant (1788/1997: 240) are almost identical.) The agent can surely promote or pursue it without its existing, so long as he *believes* it to exist; just as I can try to escape from an escape-proof prison as long as I believe escape to be possible. As long, then, as an agent believes that a perfect harmony between virtue and happiness is attainable through the causal power of a supreme being outside nature, then he can – and presumably will – strive for that harmony or, perhaps better, aim at that harmony, even if no such harmony *is* attainable. (Here we have an analogue of the well-known objection to Kant's refutation of idealism, namely that all it can establish is that we must believe in the existence of an outer world if we are to have true beliefs about our inner experiences.)

Linda Zagzebski (2005) has similar worries about Kant's transcendental argument for postulating God, replacing it with an argument inspired by Kant but importantly different. She argues in the following way (which I heavily paraphrase in places): (1) Morality is demanding, inescapable, and pervasive; (2) Morality requires acting on certain motives rather than others, and also aiming much of the time at producing certain outcomes; (3) 'No one can be required to engage in an activity if he reasonably judges that he is taking a risk that it is pointless or self-defeating and is unable to judge the degree of the risk' (ibid. 354); (4) 'The moral life requires some degree of confidence that the effort to be moral is not pointless or self-defeating' (op. cit.); (5) To have such confidence, we need to be able for the most part to trust our moral beliefs, the accuracy of our motives, and the likely success of producing the morally right outcomes; (6) A radical sceptical hypothesis has it that we can trust none of these things; (7) Since morality makes no demand on us unless we have reason to believe such scepticism false, '[m]oral obligation requires that there be a guarantor of our trust in our moral beliefs, motives, and success in action. As Kant puts it, we must suppose the existence of a cause adequate to the effect: a Providential God' (ibid.: 355).

Zagzebski claims that her version of the transcendental argument escapes the objection raised earlier to Kant because, on her version, morality *requires* our moral beliefs, motives, and action outcomes to accord with reality. It is not enough that we suppose them to be so; they must *be*

so. That aside, Zagzebski faces the difficulty that premise (3) is dubious, both in itself and in the context of her argument. First, take an example: a soldier might be morally required to try to achieve a significant military objective despite knowing that there is a risk his mission will end in utter failure. Nor might he be able to judge just how risky the operation is. But if, say, no one else is available to take on the mission, it may well be his duty to do so. Moreover, if he is *commanded* to do so by his superior officer, then at least in most cases he is morally obliged to obey, hence *ipso facto* morally obliged to carry out the operation. Second, in the context of the argument the requirement seems too strong. The sceptical hypothesis, like most such hypotheses, has it that something we believe or do *might* be false or pointless. Yes, our motives, beliefs and the likely outcomes of our actions might be quite different from what we take them to be. But must we conclude that a supreme guarantor exists who rules out this hypothesis? Just as Descartes's invocation of God as an anti-sceptical move is highly questionable, so is Zagzebski's, with her use of the term 'risk' here being tendentious. As a logical possibility, let us suppose, there is massive failure of alignment between what I take to be my moral motives (and the like) and the way things really are. But does this constitute a *risk*, any more than the logical possibility (if it be so) of my being a brain in a vat or at the mercy of an evil deceiver?

On the kind of argument I propose, it is not a question of motivational or other scepticism at all. Rather, there are two possibilities: (i) Morality is demanding, inescapable, and pervasive, yet there is no ultimate reward, no final happiness in submitting to its demands; (ii) Morality has these features, and such a prospect does indeed exist. On the former, morality seems absurd and pointless, a cruel trick minus the trickster. On the latter, there is – contra Kant – a necessary connection between happiness and virtue. If morality is not pointless, then all your effort must pay off – not just for others, but for yourself. Kant is right that no agent can be guaranteed such an accord in this world, so there must be another in which the accord is certain. Yet whereas on Kant's argument the obligation to *pursue* moral rectitude can only be met on the condition of *postulating* a being who can align happiness with virtue, on my position the obligation to *be* good requires the real *existence* of a being who guarantees that the obligation is not an absurdity; which this being can only do by rewarding those who take the obligation as seriously as it really is.

For both philosophers and ordinary folk the immediate response is likely to be that the view I am proposing bases morality on selfish motives, which Kant taught us not to do. Indeed, religious believers are regularly subjected to that charge: 'You only do what you think is right so you can get to Heaven/avoid Hell', and so on. The so-called 'New Atheists' delight in levelling such accusations (see, e.g., Dennett 2006: ch.10). There are many misconceptions in this view, but I want to begin by accepting that the prospect of ultimate happiness for being good and ultimate unhappiness for being bad should, and does, form part of the moral motivation of religious believers. It might be tempting to deny this outright: the believer acts out of genuine sympathy, love (of God and neighbour), a belief in what is right, and so on. This is all true, but not only does it not exclude acting out of a desire for personal salvation – it *requires* it. At least on the classical conception, the theist is morally bound to love her creator, and if she understands what kind of being He is (at least in outline), then she would be irrational and foolish not to love Him. The first thing to understand is that she does not love Him as a means to the *further* end of ultimate happiness; rather, loving Him just *is* wanting to be with Him, and she knows that being with Him just *is* ultimate happiness. Second, she is bound to love God because He is the author of her very being, of the entire universe, as well as its providential governor. As she must love her parents because they are the authors, in the *proximate* sense, of her existence, and the providential governors of the household and restricted environment in which she lives, so she must love her *ultimate* author and governor.

Third, since the author of the entire universe is *ipso facto* the author of the moral system by which human beings must live, the theist must love God for the authorship of that system, which includes everything that it requires of a person without exception. As a matter of conceptual truth, the believer cannot possibly love God as the author of morality while at the same time disrespecting morality: so he must respect it wholeheartedly and completely, which means abiding by it as far as his powers and circumstances allow. The converse of this line of thought is that if the believer lives a moral life, it must be because he loves God as its author, and since loving Him means wanting to be with Him, he must want to be with Him as the believer's ultimate happiness. Since there is a metaphysical connection of the sort just described between God and morality, and since the believer knows it, it would be supremely irrational for the believer to live a moral life without being motivated by the desire to find happiness with the very being who created the moral system, and the possibility of a moral life, in the first place.

The charge of selfishness, or at least self-interestedness, seems immediately to bite. For if *this* is all that spurs the believer to be good, then he surely is motivated not by what is right and good *simpliciter*, but by what is right and good *for him*. Yet the charge is equally quickly defused. For a start, there is no Kantian worry about the contingency of self-interest. In the mundane world of contingent material circumstance, what is morally good to do may well not coincide with what promotes my contingent desires and interests, nor even with what my nature requires on this earth – health, stable and pleasant relations with others, property, and so on. But on the theistic conception, there is nothing contingent about what will cause my ultimate happiness. If I have the right attitude to the things that God has authored, then I *must* find happiness with Him in the end; in other words, the self-interest in ultimate happiness is a necessary correlate of living a good life.

Secondly, nothing that has been said in outlining the religious position entails that personal happiness is or should be the *only* motive of living a good life. All that is required is that it be *a* motive. What other motive might there be, on this view? One cannot generalize too easily across religious traditions, of course, but at least on the traditional Christian conception of goodness as developed by the medieval philosophers, in particular Aquinas, morality is not inscrutable – as it would be if it were an unfathomable system proposed by the impenetrable divine will. God does not author a mere system of principles with which we are bound to live in accord, even if they cannot be understood in their essence. Instead, acting as remote cause, God produces a world of which, given its nature, the principles are *true*. Such is the classical natural law theory of morality. What is morally good is that which, when done, fulfils some aspect of human nature – life (of course), health, family, property, liberty, knowledge, aesthetic experience, and the like (all suitably qualified and balanced against each other). What is morally bad frustrates or damages some aspect of human nature. The principles of morality are true precisely because they codify the fundamental metaphysical truths about human nature, including our lives together in society. Hence, when acting morally, we are acting in accord with these truths – respecting, promoting, and protecting the various human goods underlying them.

The point of this all-too-brief summary is that there is an abundant supply of *normative features* in the world (to use contemporary parlance) to which an agent can respond when he acts morally. He is fully able to be *motivated* by those features since he is able to understand them. None of us fully fathoms human nature, so the understanding is always incomplete. But we know enough to be able to take the relevant normative features as a genuine spur to action. Further, as the theist insists, these normative features too are authored by a divine being outside nature. Indeed, it is not as though the moral system and its underlying metaphysic are the products of two separate acts of creation: in creating the latter, God *ipso facto* creates the former. Since, again, the believer understands this (as I am supposing) he will, in acting well, respond to

the proximate normative features *in addition* to the prospect of ultimate happiness with the being who created them. If he loves God, as he must, he is bound to respond to *both*.

I have suggested that it would be irrational for the theist not to be moved by the prospect of ultimate happiness. It would also, I suggest, be irrational – in general – not to respond to the normative features of the world that underlie moral truth. But it is not always a matter of irrationality. Although, as Aquinas (1265–74/1915: I.II q.94 a.6; Volume 8, 51–52) famously holds, the general principles of the natural law cannot be erased from a person's conscience, it is still possible not to know, or to misapply, more particular principles of morality for all sorts of reasons: the general principle may be hard to apply in complex circumstances; bad customs or culture may suppress moral knowledge in an individual; the person may be blinded by emotion or contrary inclination; and so on. In such cases, failure to be motivated by the right – or any – normative features will be less a case of irrationality than of, say, ignorance, confusion, or psychological disorder. Do such circumstances prevent an agent from acting morally – not just in terms of outcomes but in terms of motive?

It is worth briefly considering obedience in general to help answer this question. For a strict Kantian, internal obedience to anything but the moral law itself can contribute no 'moral worth' to an act. As we noted earlier, for less rigorous Kantians, as for most moralists, doing something not merely because it is the right/good thing to do, but because a person loves someone or something or sympathizes with another, does contribute worth. But what about pure obedience to authority, or at least obedience motivated by love or fear of authority? As far as love goes, I might act well through refraining from doing something potentially harmful to someone I love – but must it be the potential victim? What if I love the person who told me to refrain? Children are certainly in a state of moral immaturity, but once they have reason they are capable of acting morally. Yet a child with reason might still act well in some cases only because their parents told them what to do, and they love, respect, and/or fear their parents. Is there no moral worth in their act? We can accept that it would be *better* were they to respond also (or only, for non-theists) to the normative features of the situation – for example, that an act would deprive someone of property that is rightfully theirs, that it would cause them immense pain, that it would make them very sad, and the like – but why should we think that motivation by love, fear, and/or respect for authority counts for nothing at all? A child just may not know, or be able to grasp through their own reasoning, why a bad act is bad in terms of the normative features of the situation. Many circumstances are complex and require much reasoning and a depth of maturity that few of us, let alone children, possess. We may not be to blame for our ignorance; yet we can, many theists would say, still act well both subjectively, as regards our motives, and objectively, in terms of the outcome of our action.

Again, what should we say about obedience to/fear of the law, by which I mean man-made (positive) law rather than divine law? It is surely 'morally worthy' to stop at a red light on crowded roads out of respect for the safety of others. But what if I am not thinking of others' safety? What if I am in a hurry, distracted by thoughts of being late for work, annoyed at the other drivers, and yet I still stop? We can grant that if I positively do not care about others' safety, the worth of my act is vitiated no matter what other motives I have, including fear for my own safety. But if I am simply not thinking about them, and what brings me to a stop at the red light is fear of being arrested, has my act been denuded of 'moral worth'? We do not have to think that 'I was just obeying orders' excuses arbitrary behaviour for us still to believe that, at least in some cases, pure obedience to the law out of fear of the consequences can make an act worthy, if not the best, as far as motive is concerned. Law is designed to keep society in order, and applies to everyone who possesses enough reason to know the difference between right and wrong. It would be strange to say that because it applies to such people they don't need it since they

already *know* the difference between right and wrong! Rather, the legislator appreciates that people can fail to apply their reason in all sorts of normal and understandable circumstances. The law exists primarily to keep society stable and individuals on the ‘straight and narrow’. If a person obeys in some case or other purely because the law requires them to and exacts punishment if they do not, then the person displays no other virtue than that of obedience: but obedience itself *is* a virtue, suitably qualified and interpreted. Similarly, if a person obeys the natural law only because they believe (the theist would say *know*) that by disobeying they risk divine disfavour, and/or that by obeying they remain on good terms with their creator, why is this to be characterized as a case of unworthy self-interest? Needless to say, such a motive should not be the sole informant of everything a person does, for then their God-given reason would remain idle, which itself would be an offence against their creator. But it only takes one legitimate case of such motivation to make the theist’s point.

In general, however, the dual motive of response to normative features and ultimate love/fear of God ensures that pure self-interest never informs a theist’s moral life. There may appear to be tension between the two, but if what I have said is plausible, the tension is only apparent.

Cosmic justice

Although I have spoken much about reward and punishment, and the ultimate pointlessness of the moral life in the absence of these, I have not said anything about justice. At most, I could have put the above discussion in the following terms: without personal reward and punishment as the ultimate consequences of a morally good or bad life respectively, life would be unfair or unjust. Leaving aside whether this would be a good way of putting it, I have omitted to speak in terms of justice because, if I had, it would still have been only a point about justice in the case of an individual agent. In other words, each individual could think to themselves that it would be unjust *to them* were adherence to the demanding, inescapable, pervasive moral system not sweetened by the prospect of ultimate happiness.

There is, however, a further consideration. Although I have no personal stake in the matter, I would regard it as outrageous were – to use hackneyed examples – Hitler, Stalin, and Pol Pot not to have met their ultimate punishment and, say, St Francis of Assisi not to have entered into his ultimate reward. Whatever I may think about my own situation, it *also* matters to me that *others* should be ultimately accountable for their actions. In other words, morality seems not only pointless but fundamentally an unjust system if there is no additional system of ‘cosmic justice’, as I have called it (Oderberg 2011), whereby ultimate rewards and punishments are dispensed appropriately to those who have lived fundamentally good and bad lives, respectively.

We know for a fact that neither Hitler, Stalin, nor Pol Pot suffered in their earthly lives a fraction of what we all – believers and non-believers – think they should have, given the evil deeds they carried out. We also know that St Francis of Assisi, for all the joys he experienced on earth, suffered much. Fewer people in general seem to be concerned with ultimate reward for the saintly than with final punishment for the wicked, but that is probably a complex psychological bias. In any case, sticking with those who have reached the depths of depravity, are we to suppose that this strong belief we all hold – that evil people should meet appropriately severe deserts – is a relic of immature religious thinking that infects even the otherwise healthy secularist? It is hard not to hear the intended message of the story of the Ring of Gyges (Plato 350 BCE/2004 *Republic* Book 2 359d–360b; 38). Yet the Platonic/Socratic answer, in terms of the health of the soul, sounds hollow to the theist (as perhaps to Plato himself, given the Myth of Er and the account in *Gorgias*). For all that Hitler may have been consumed in the bunker by despair that his beloved ‘thousand-year Reich’ was going down in flames after just twelve years,

we would hardly consider that just deserts. In any case, as far as we know neither Stalin nor Pol Pot had demises that smelled sweetly of 'poetic justice'. The gnawing truth is that they all got away with their crimes, at least on earth.

It is wholly understandable both to try not to think about these unpalatable facts, and when confronted with them to wonder, 'Well, just why should anyone bother to be good?' Of course, if a person wishes to gamble at this point, we can tell them that they would have to be extremely lucky to lead a life in which wickedness was never repaid with severe enough consequences to make them regret their risk-taking. But the cosmic justice point is *not* about regret; it is about what is *just* or fitting. Even if a person lived a depraved life that was met with all sorts of obstacles and human punishments, but they persevered – as many do – in a life of vice, the question would be whether the accumulated earthly suffering was necessarily an appropriate and complete punishment for the evil done. We know that it very often is not. The religious believer thinks it *never* is, at least if they understand mortal sin in the traditional way – as an infinite offence against the infinite majesty of God. But we can all agree that, all too often, people simply do not 'get what is coming to them', which should bother a philosopher as much as it should the man on the Clapham omnibus.

Which is worse: for morality to be an absurdity, or for it to be fundamentally unjust? To call it unjust sounds paradoxical, since injustice *is* a moral issue, and so how could morality condemn itself? We need to remember that it is not only individual agents who can be unjust: so can situations. Indeed, a situation can be unjust even though no person has acted unjustly (contra Hayek 1976: 67–70). Suppose, for example, that a natural disaster destroys vast swathes of property belonging to half the population, while the other half is spared yet physically cut off from being able to help their poor fellow citizens. Although no one has acted unjustly in such a circumstance, the situation is unjust – an extreme, unfair inequality imposed on a society by natural forces. Some (such as Hayek) might object that the situation is not unjust, only unfortunate, but the distinction is merely terminological unless the objector thinks that no unfortunate situation *ought* to be rectified. Even if we restrict consideration to situations affecting groups of people rather than individuals, there are clearly circumstances that look like objective disorders in the arrangement of things: things ought to be thus-and-so, but they are not. For my argument to work, I need not appeal to the implausible general principle that if a situation ought to be rectified then *someone* ought to rectify it. I appeal only to the specific thought that if a situation ought to be rectified, and its not being rectified entails the fundamental and ultimate pointlessness of the moral life, then it will be rectified, given that the pointlessness of the moral life is an unacceptable alternative. But if it will be rectified, and this cannot happen without the intervention of an agent, then some agent will rectify it. And if no human beings can rectify it, individually or collectively, then some other agent will rectify it.

Now consider the cruel dictator. He acts unjustly, to be sure, but the fundamental injustice of his escaping his just deserts need not be caused by anything that *he* has done wrong. He has no control over what happens to him – if anything – after he dies, and while alive we can suppose he is plain lucky. His enemies try repeatedly but fail to assassinate him. International tribunals do not have the reach to impose any sanctions on him. Many people oppose him, but they are collectively powerless to stop him. Yet we think it is profoundly unfair that he should get away with his crimes. Clearly, the notion of unfairness we are operating with is at a higher level than that of human justice: no person on earth has failed to do what they could, but there is still a higher-order moral remainder. Something *else* needs to be the case for the world to be made right, and that has to be an ultimate sanction, fully appropriate to the dictator's crimes. The non-believer in divinity must come to terms with the fact that he also does not believe in any such sanction. Either he must say that the world is fundamentally unjust, or that our sense

of collective outrage is mistaken, a delusional harking back to the fire and brimstone of our benighted ancestors.

This is not something secularists like to contemplate. It is, however, a prospect that ought to be confronted by any person who takes morality as seriously as I have suggested it should be taken. A world that is, at bottom, deeply unjust looks to have all the pointlessness of a purely absurd world, with all the additional offences against our collective moral sense that give it an extra savour of bitterness. The present sketch of the situation is far less a deductive argument than an invitation to renewed discussion of what, in secular moral theory, is a much-neglected topic.

RELIGION AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Neil Levy

The truth of, and adherence to, a religion has been thought by many to be necessary for life to be meaningful. It is not hard to see why this should be so. To ask after the meaning of life is, plausibly, to ask the ultimate ‘why’ question; that is, to ask why it matters whether we live or die, or live in one way rather than another. When people have asked themselves this question, it has seemed to most that an adequate answer must cite goods external to the self. Though it is widely held that meaningfulness has a subjective component – a meaningful life is a life in which the person is passionately engaged – most philosophers have thought that this engagement must be with activities that connect to and promote values that transcend the self (Nozick 1981; Wiggins 1998; Kekes 2000; Wolf 2010). A life devoted to pleasures, no matter how successful it might be on its own terms, is not meaningful if it fails to promote external and genuine goods. It might even be held that meaningfulness is a function (inter alia) of the objective significance of the good promoted. The person who is passionately devoted to her garden, say, might promote a good that is bigger than herself, and thereby achieve some degree of meaning, but we may suspect that she lives a life less meaningful than one that promotes some objectively more valuable good (say, curing cancer). These considerations lead quite naturally to the thought that meaningfulness requires that some religion be true. Religions purport to offer objective goods – participation in God’s plan, for instance – which surpass all others in value. Hence, the promotion of those goods might be seen to be the supremely meaningful life.

In this chapter, I aim to examine the claim that meaningfulness requires the existence of, and perhaps devotion to, God.¹ I will argue that there are strong grounds for rejecting this claim. There is no good reason to think that our lives are any the less meaningful if God does not exist, I will conclude. I will not advance a naturalistic conception of meaningfulness. There are several on the market (e.g. Kekes 2000; Wolf 2010), and I will not attempt to adjudicate between them here or to add to what I have said on the topic elsewhere (Levy 2005). My aim, therefore, is essentially negative: to argument against those who maintain that God is necessary for meaningfulness, and not for a particular rival view.

It should be noted that the view against which I am concerned to argue is not the only theistic position on the meaning of life. Though most theists who have written on this topic have argued that God is necessary for meaningfulness, it might also be held, more weakly, that a life devoted (wholly or in part) to God is one kind of meaningful life. I will not examine such views here. I will devote some space to consideration of a view at the opposite end of the

spectrum from my primary concern: the view that the existence of (a certain kind of) God is actually incompatible with meaningfulness in human life. For the most part, however, I will limit myself to the view that God's existence is a necessary condition of meaningfulness.

Preliminaries

The view that God is necessary for a meaningful life itself comes in a variety of forms. In one form, it maintains that only a religious life can be a meaningful life. More strongly still, it might be held that adherence to one religion in particular – or one kind of religion – is required for a meaningful life. Obviously, adherents of particular religions might hold that their religion has a monopoly on truth, and that therefore adherence to it is required for a meaningful life, but there may be other reasons why religions with certain features might be thought to better promote meaningfulness than others. For instance, meaningfulness might be thought to require that we participate in the plan of an omniscient and perfectly benevolent God; in that case, a meaningful life can be had only if a religion that postulates the existence of such a God is true. Those religions (for example, some strands of Buddhism) which do not postulate the existence of a deity, and those religions (for example some of the polytheisms of the ancient world) which postulate the existence of deities who are not omniscient or not perfectly benevolent, would not secure meaning for us if they were true. On the other hand, a meaningful life might require the truth of a religion, because a meaningful life requires that moral truths are objective, and only the truth of a religion can secure this objectivity. In that case, we might have meaningful lives on a wider variety of religious views, including some that do not postulate the existence of an omniscient and perfectly benevolent god. However, most of the extant literature presupposes that the meaning-conferring God is the God of Western theology, and it is upon views of this kind that I will focus.

Why might it be thought that the truth of, and/or adherence to, some religion is required for a meaningful life? There are three principal arguments in the literature:

1. Meaning is conferred only, or especially, by participation in God's *plan*.
2. Meaning requires personal *immortality* (or, in another version, the indefinite persistence of the plans and projects to which we contribute).
3. Meaning requires that the goods we pursue be *objectively* valuable, where this is held to require the truth of some supernatural account of value.

Call these the *plan*, *immortality* and *objectivity* arguments. I will address these arguments in turn. However, it is worth saying something about their commonalities before addressing their differences.

In developing her case for the view that meaningfulness consists in subjective commitment to objectively valuable goods, Susan Wolf (2010) sets out several reasons why we seem to have a psychological need to see ourselves as engaged in the promotion of the objectively valuable and not just the individually satisfying. We want the value in our lives to be recognizable from points of view other than our own, even from a God's-eye perspective (ibid. 27); as a consequence of our deeply social natures we want to be able to hold up our heads before our peers; and we want our activities to make a difference despite our mortality (ibid. 28). For Wolf, these needs can be met by engagement in activities that do not require the truth of any non-natural account of the universe, but it is easy to see why the needs she cites might seem to require for their satisfaction something longer-lasting and – somehow – more transcendent than the activities she promotes. If recognition from the perspective of others is valuable to us, then how

much more valuable is recognition by the unsurpassable Other? Indeed, if our subjective conviction is unable to satisfy us that our projects are valuable, why should adding more – equally fallible – observers help? If the ‘thought that one’s life is like a bubble that, upon bursting, will vanish without a trace can lead some people to despair’ (Wolf 2010: 28), why should they get any solace from reflecting that we contribute to activities which, though perhaps longer-lasting than ourselves, are themselves destined to pass away in turn? Wolf cites advancing the cause of social justice and doing philosophy as activities that can make a life meaningful. But in the face of the heat death of the universe, these activities may seem as pointless as Wolf’s paradigms of meaningless activities, such as devotion to Sudoku puzzles. Ultimately, surely, it comes to the same thing whether I develop a better account of the supervenience of moral properties on natural properties – or, for that matter, whether I cure cancer – or instead watch reruns of *MASH*. In the long run, as John Maynard Keynes noted, we are all dead, and when we are gone the traces of our activities will follow us into oblivion.

Thus, the motives that move us to think that meaningfulness depends not merely on finding our lives fulfilling but also on engagement with objectively valuable goods can also lead us to find merely naturalistic sources of value unsatisfying, and thereby push us toward theistic accounts of meaning in life. In their different ways, the three arguments for the view that a meaningful life requires the truth of, as well as perhaps adherence to, a religion all develop the reasons Wolf gives for thinking that meaning depends on engagement with objectively valuable goods.

The plan argument

One way of engaging with objectively, and supremely, valuable goods is by playing a role in the plan that an omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly benevolent God has laid out for the world. In Metz’s (2007a) terms, this is a God-centred view, rather than a soul-centred view; we can play a role in God’s plan whether or not we are ensouled. Obviously, not just any god will do. We would not derive meaning from playing a role in the plans of the trickster gods of many pantheons. We derive meaning from God’s plan only if God is a supremely wise and supremely good deity, whose plan provides us with a fittingly meaningful life. The omniscient and perfectly good God of the Abrahamic religion fits the bill nicely.²

As it is commonly conceived, the plan argument requires not merely the truth of some suitable religion, but also adherence to it. By spreading the gospel (say), the believer plays a role in the plan; perhaps establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth or ensuring the salvation of other people. There are also (compatible) plan arguments that do not entail that meaningful lives can be lived only by believers. Perhaps we play a role in God’s plan by doing good works, independent of our beliefs. Indeed, perhaps all our actions, good and bad, help to effect God’s plans; Harris (2005) cites a number of eighteenth-century philosophers who claimed that we ought to see even in the crimes of our enemies ‘purely an instrument in the hand of God, for effectuating his wise and benevolent designs’, as Alexander Crombie put it (quoted in Harris 2005: 213).

In some of its forms, the plan argument satisfies one of the desiderata set down by Cottingham (2003); it makes a meaningful life accessible to all. If the plan argument is put forward in a form that requires adherence to a particular religion, then it is plausible to think that it does not satisfy this desideratum, inasmuch as it is a contingent matter whether our geographical and (especially) our historical location permits us to embrace a particular religion. But we can all ‘turn ourselves sincerely towards the good’, as Cottingham (2003: 70) puts it. It might be objected that in its least restrictive version, according to which all our actions, good and bad, play a role in God’s plan, success is *too* easy. But this need not be the case: the proponent of the

plan argument in this form might claim that though every action helps to further God's plan, only those agents who play a positive role in the plan thereby derive meaning for themselves. That is, though evildoers further the plan, and thereby meaningfulness, their own lives do not derive meaning from this fact. This is *prima facie* plausible, inasmuch as inadvertently or unknowingly contributing to a project one does not endorse hardly seems to add meaning to one's own life, though it might be a cause of meaning in the lives of others.

The plan argument seems to be subject to a *Euthyphro*-style objection. It does not seem plausible that we derive meaning from playing just any role in just any plan, even a divine plan. As Nozick (1981) points out, serving as a food source for intergalactic travellers doesn't seem to confer meaning on our lives. However, proponents of the argument have a ready reply: though they ought to concede that only *some* divine plans can confer meaning on our lives, they can insist that *only* divine plans can do the job. They might here rely upon the kind of considerations that Nozick himself has put forward. According to Nozick, we can derive meaning only from a relationship with something that is itself meaningful. We can no more derive meaning from connection with something that is not meaningful than we can derive importance by being important to some project that is not itself important. But if meaning depends on a relationship to something that is meaningful, that further thing must itself either derive its meaning in turn by connection to something that is more meaningful, or somehow put an end to the regress. The obvious way to put an end to the regress is by having it stopped by something that is intrinsically meaningful, though Nozick himself suggests a different way in which God might put an end to the regress: by blocking further questions regarding meaningfulness. For him, 'meaning' is a semantic property, and a life can have meaning only in virtue of a reference relation. God – or some suitable substitute – is infinite; because God is infinite, we cannot ask about His meaning, because one of the presuppositions of that question, 'namely that there be something external to the thing in question', is not satisfied (Nozick 1981: 601). Something that is all-encompassing cannot refer to anything beyond itself. Grounding meaning in the infinite therefore puts a stop to further questions, not because the infinite is intrinsically meaningful but because we cannot meaningfully ask whether it is meaningful at all. The proponent of the plan argument could therefore hold that God's purposes alone can provide us with meaning either because only these purposes could connect us to the infinite, or because only God is intrinsically meaningful.

The success of an argument like this depends in important part on the plausibility of claiming that we need a regress stopper. Different responses will be needed to Nozick's own argument, which depends on his claim that meaningfulness requires some kind of reference, and to the claim that the regress must bottom out in something that is intrinsically meaningful. Evaluating Nozick's argument is difficult, because participants in the debate have not done enough to unpack phrases like 'the meaning of life'. We may, however, suspect that he takes the word 'meaning' too literally. When we ask about the meaning of our lives, we do not ask about its semantic properties, but about its *importance*. As Metz (2005: 255) puts it, when people ask what makes life meaningful, 'they are generally asking something to the effect of what it might be about life that is worthy of great pride or admiration'. Importance is not a semantic property, so the idea that meaning depends upon the satisfaction of some kind of reference relation seems to be best resisted. The rival notion, that God is required to stop a regress of meaningfulness (understood as importance), because only God is intrinsically meaningful, is also contestable. Why shouldn't promoting intrinsically valuable natural properties confer meaning on us?

Of course, it might be claimed that no natural property is intrinsically valuable, but that view is implausible. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoyevsky asks us whether it would be right to found the edifice of everlasting human happiness on the tears of a single child. For him, peace

and rest for all cannot redeem the suffering of a single child. Many people share his intuition; plausibly because suffering is intrinsically bad, though the sufferer passes out of existence. But if suffering can be intrinsically bad, then why cannot some goods be intrinsically good? Consider two worlds that come into existence at t and pass entirely out of existence at $t+1$. World 1 contains no sentient beings; world 2 contains one sentient being who experiences joy for the duration of the existence of the world it inhabits. Isn't world 2 better than world 1, regardless of whether the joy experienced in it has a significance beyond itself? If joy can be intrinsically good, it seems that positive axiological goods need not depend upon anything beyond themselves to have value, and the way is open for us to maintain that meaning (understood as importance) is constituted by or supervenes upon natural properties.³

Some thinkers have gone further, holding that not only is a divine plan unnecessary for meaning; such a plan is actually inconsistent with meaning. Kurt Baier (2000: 120), for instance, claimed that the idea is offensive, because 'it is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose'. Levine (1987) objects that Baier misdescribes the relationship between humanity and God, since on the theistic view God's purpose is not at odds with ours; rather, God's purpose is also what is most valuable for us. Even if this response succeeds, however, it does so at the cost of making a slightly different objection more pressing. The worry I have in mind is that being assigned a role to play in God's plan is not so much degrading as infantilizing.

On the standard view, if God's purpose coincides with ours, this is because God has brought this coincidence about. In that case, however, one may think that the role that has been assigned to humanity in God's plan is too stage-managed to confer meaning. Far from conferring meaning on us, being asked to play a role in something that amounts to nothing more than a game is infantilizing. Playing our assigned roles in a game is not meaning-bestowing; it is hard to see how the fact that the game is on a massive scale and designed by God helps matters. God is traditionally conceived of as a father-figure in Christianity and related religious traditions. But if the relationship between ourselves and God is analogous to the relationship between parents and their children, it is hard to see how this relationship confers meaning on us.

Cottingham (2005) responds to worries like this one by pointing out that the parent-child relationship is not static but instead a dynamic process in which, ideally at least, the parent seeks the growing independence and autonomy of the child. Submission to dependence, in this light, can be part of a mutual search for a growing independence. The point that the parent-child relationship ideally develops toward the independence of the child is well taken, but it is far from clear that it solves the problem; there are significant differences between the parent-child relationship and the relationship between creator and creature. The *telos* of the parental relationship, 'the future hoped-for state when the child itself achieves the status of adulthood, and converses with parent as an independent being' (Cottingham 2005: 41) is regularly achieved, but humans cannot achieve equality with God. Though we might grow, spiritually and psychologically, through our relationship with God, inequality is a permanent feature of the relationship. It is plausible, moreover, to think that the gap between God and ourselves is always infinitely larger than that which prevails between parent and child at *any* stage of their relationship. Children may rightly come to see that the graded series of (strictly speaking, unnecessary) challenges placed before them by parents and teachers should be appreciated, because they allowed them to develop their powers of reasoning and acting, which they can apply to genuine problems once they mature. But the challenges God presents us with remain toy problems; we never confront God as equals and our aid can never be required by Him.

Nozick (1981) has suggested a response to worries like this. The infantilization worry can be avoided only if God's plan is somehow intrinsically meaningful, not a mere arbitrary game, he suggests. Accordingly, Nozick sketches a 'historical fable' on which God confers meaning on

himself by conferring meaning on the cosmos. Whether this suggestion conflicts with God's perfection I leave to the specialist (see Metz 2000 for relevant discussion). As Nozick notes, there are other grounds on which to reject the suggestion. Meaning might be something that does not require a transcendent purpose, as the atheist might insist, but surely it cannot be quite so self-referential as the suggested proposal would have it. God cannot derive meaning from a design whose purpose it is to confer meaning on him. Several writers (at least as far back as Mill 1873/1971) have noted that meaning cannot be derived from a project whose purpose is to confer meaning; rather, meaning seems to derive from the wholehearted pursuit of a project aimed at some goal that is (believed to be) intrinsically valuable. The same problem seems to arise here: for God's design to confer meaning on God – and thereby on us – 'the plan must have some independent purpose and meaning itself' (Nozick 1981: 590).

Metz (2000) – responding to Baier's worry that God's assigning us a purpose would be degrading to human dignity – puts forward a suggestion that, if successful, would solve the infantilization worry by explaining how God's assigning a purpose to human beings is compatible with our autonomy and dignity. If our purpose is to exercise our free will in moral actions, then – given the truth of libertarianism about free will – it is logically impossible that God could bring it about that we fulfil our purpose, Metz argues. Hence God could need our help for His ends to be realized. Further, His assigning such an end to us could hardly count as patronizing or infantilizing. There are two problems with this suggestion. First, it is false that God cannot cause libertarian agents to exercise their free will in moral behaviour. Libertarianism, in any remotely plausible version, entails only that there are some directly free actions that are metaphysically undetermined. But many of these actions would be morally permissible, even laudable, no matter how the agent exercises her free will (consider an agent choosing between donating her money to Oxfam or Amnesty International), and it is perfectly possible to cause agents to confront directly free choices of this sort. It is also possible to cause agents to perform indirectly free actions; say by determining their mental states. Second, the end that Metz envisages assigned to us by God is surely too thin to be plausibly appealed to in a supernaturalist account of meaningfulness. For a theist to claim that our lives are meaningful in virtue of our playing a role in God's plan, that plan must add something to the naturalistically respectable claim that our purpose in life consists in exercising our free will in moral behaviour. That something extra seems to be God's having a design to which our actions are supposed to contribute. It seems, then, that the plan argument fails. Either God's assigning us a role in a plan is infantilizing or the end assigned is too thin to be meaning-conferring.

The immortality argument

The intuition that death, if it is final, strips life of all its meaning is widespread. The essential idea is that the irrevocability of death makes everything we do and everything we achieve futile. As Nozick (op. cit.) puts it, 'A significant life leaves its mark upon the world [...] To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one's life' (582). For many theists, this intuition grounds the thought that a meaningful life requires immortality, and therefore possession of a soul.

Some philosophers have responded that for our lives to leave infinite traces, we need not be immortal, and, moreover, that immortality does not require that we possess an immortal soul (Metz 2007a). We might leave traces that persist indefinitely by having our achievements recalled, or through an unbroken succession of descendants; we might achieve personal immortality by uploading our minds onto computers. In neither case does satisfying the wish for persistence require the truth of any religion. However, as Craig (2000) has pointed out, these

solutions seem to fail, because they merely delay the disappearance of the traces we leave. The universe itself will one day undergo heat death, and the last traces of our existence will have vanished aeons prior to that. If the physical world is all the world there is, then the demand for indefinite persistence cannot be satisfied.

It should be asked, however, whether indefinite persistence is required for meaningfulness. We noted above that there seemed no need to embark on an infinite regress with regard to meaningfulness, because meaning (for all anyone has shown) may be derived from promoting naturalistically respectable intrinsically valuable goods. Similar considerations apply here: why should the fact that the people I aid (for instance) will one day pass away effect the value of the fact that I make their lives go better? The fact that someone suffered isn't somehow compensated for by the fact of their subsequent death; why should meaning be different?

Just as the plan argument has been turned against its proponents by thinkers who argue that serving in God's plan would be degrading or infantilizing, so the immortality argument has been turned against its proponents. The standard argument, stemming originally from Williams (1973), is that immortality would be boring. Eventually, one would have done everything, seen everything, experienced everything, and would seek death rather than a continuation of the tedium. Metz (2002; 2007b) claims that the objection misses its target, because boredom is compatible with meaningfulness. He gives the example of the person who consents to be bored so that others will not be. Might this be meaning-conferring? It seems that it cannot be, not, at least, forever. The knowledge of one's sacrifice might give one a warm glow, but it seems implausible that this glow would last forever.

Objections to the claim that immortality must be boring have focused on the range of activities one could engage in, and the psychological attributes of real agents that could sustain one's interest (e.g. Bortolotti and Nagasawa 2009). Attention to the psychological attributes of agents, however, suggests a different objection to the claim that one can achieve meaningfulness by personal immortality. An indefinitely persisting agent, at least one who resembles actual persons of our acquaintance, would gradually alter in its psychological properties, such that – at least on many accounts of personal identity – later stages of the organism would not be identical to earlier stages. On a psychological account of personal identity, later stages of the agent would be continuous with, but not identical to, earlier stages. Of course there are rival accounts of personal identity, on which (for instance) continuity of organism is sufficient for personal identity (Olson 1997). The supernaturalist might adapt such an account of personal identity to their needs. However, it is far from clear that we can derive meaning from persistence of identity so conceived.

Suppose we have immortal souls, and as a consequence we persist indefinitely. Most commentators agree that this fact is not sufficient by itself to confer meaning on us. Rather, immortality is felt to be a necessary condition of meaning because it ensures that we do not act in vain: the traces of our good works and achievements persist indefinitely. But if later stages of agents fail to recall these works, it is hard to see how they contribute to the meaningfulness of that agent's life. It might be replied that I need not recall my good works to derive meaning from them: it is sufficient that I perform them and that their effects persist indefinitely for me to derive meaning from them. But similar considerations apply to my deeds as to my (psychological) identity: given enough time, any contribution I make, no matter how great, seems destined to be washed away.

Of course it is open to the supernaturalist to claim that the kinds of processes that would wash away our memories and other psychological properties, and all traces of our achievements, here on Earth cannot be expected to function in the same way in eternity. This suggestion seems to face a dilemma. Either the afterlife contains many and varied activities or it does not. If

it does, then it seems likely that engagement in these activities will lay down new memories and experience, and the objection just sketched remains a strong one. If it does not, and the person spends eternity reflecting on what they have done in the past, the boredom argument becomes all the more pressing. Properly evaluating the suggestion would require much more development of the conditions that theists take to prevail in the afterlife.

The objectivity argument

A meaningful life, it is widely and plausibly held, instantiates genuine values – whether these are moral or aesthetic values, or the meaning-conferring values identified by Wolf (2010), which are allegedly irreducible to moral and aesthetic values. Many theists argue that these objective values depend for their reality on the existence of God; therefore meaningfulness requires that God exists. This is more often asserted than argued; here I shall focus on Cottingham's (2005) recent expression of the claim, which has the virtue of being accompanied by an argument.

Cottingham's thought is this: If naturalism is true, then human values are contingent. Suppose, for instance, that values are to be identified with our idealized dispositions, and that these dispositions are the product of an entirely naturalistic evolution. In that case, ultimately, our values are 'determined by a kind of genetic roulette' (ibid. 53). Had the course of evolution unfolded differently, we would have had very different dispositions and therefore different values. The realization of this contingency in our values Cottingham takes to undermine their objectivity.

Though Cottingham does not refer to this literature, the objection he sketches here is actually one that has received a great deal of attention from naturalistic philosophers. A number of philosophers have argued that if evolution is the best explanation of the content of our moral claims, then these claims cannot be objective, in something like Cottingham's sense of 'objective'. These philosophers differ from Cottingham in that they are thoroughgoing naturalists; hence they reject the objectivity of ethics in favour of an evolutionary expressivism. Evolutionary expressivists conclude that moral judgments do not really state claims about the world outside us at all. Instead, they express our feelings, our evolved sentiments (Ruse 1998; Waller 1996, 1997). Something like this argument has been advanced most powerfully by Sharon Street (2006), and it is her version of the argument to which I will direct my remarks.

Like Cottingham, Street bases her argument on the plausible claim that evolution is a highly contingent process, such that under different conditions we would have come to have a different set of values from those we actually espouse. Naturalists have often responded to arguments like this by claiming that moral facts are, or supervene upon, perfectly ordinary natural facts, and since the latter facts are objective so are the former. Against this move, Street presses an equally familiar objection. Suppose (for instance) the realist advances a reductive account according to which moral facts are identical to the set of natural properties N . But, Street says, had evolution unfolded differently, the set of moral facts, M , would have been identical to properties N^* ; if we have evolved to respond to N^* and not N . This is not realism at all, Street says, because it makes the $M = N$ identity dependent on our responses. All we need to do to change the moral facts is to change our attitudes. Street takes the bare conceptual possibility that in other possible worlds moral systems that conflict with ours might have developed to be sufficient to show that moral realism is false. Hence, the truth of evolution entails that moral claims are not objective.⁴

As Street recognizes, however, there is a realist reply available: identify the moral facts with the facts that are *actually* picked out by our responses. That is, the naturalist can advance a rigidified response-dependent realism. On a response-dependent construal, the extension of moral concepts is determined by the responses of competent users of those concepts. Response-dependence can

yield a relativism: if different sets of responses determine different concepts. But a rigidified response-dependence identifies the extension of the relevant concepts with the responses of *actual* agents, yielding an analysis something along the following lines:

X is morally good if X is disposed to produce a sentiment of moral approbation in normal human beings as they *actually* are.

Of course, as it stands this analysis is clearly inadequate: normal humans as they actually are are notoriously unreliable moral judges. Defenders of rigidified response-dependence therefore idealize normal human agents in various ways. Thus, moral concepts are taken to refer to whatever actions or states of affairs arouse appropriate responses in actual human beings under ideal conditions. I won't say much here about what kind of conditions are ideal, except this: there ought to be a consistency requirement of some sort on moral judgments.

Now rigidified response-dependence apparently yields objective moral concepts. Though on this view there is some degree of mind-dependence – moral concepts are relativized to the responses of idealized human beings – the reference of moral terms is fixed across all possible worlds, whether or not there are minds like ours in those worlds. Suppose, then, that evolution had taken a different turn, and we had evolved to use moral language differently. Suppose beings evolved such that (even suitably idealized) they were disposed to apply the word 'good' or its cognates, used in a distinctively moral sense, to actions that we are disposed to condemn as immoral (torturing babies for fun, or what have you). How should we respond to the (apparent) conceptual possibility of such beings? Given that we have rigidified moral concepts to *actual* human beings, we needn't conclude that torturing babies *is* good, or even that it is good *for* these beings. What is good is what is picked out by *our* moral terms, not theirs. The objectivity, and the necessity, of moral concepts is thereby secured.

Street briefly considers and rejects this line of argument. She argues that it doesn't count as genuinely realist, because 'there is no robust sense' in which our imagined aliens would be 'making a *mistake* or *missing anything*' if their evaluative attitudes tracked a different set of facts to those tracked by our responses (Street 2006: 138). We cannot claim that they are making a mistake, Street says, because the rigidifying move is as available to them as to us; we therefore have no better grounds for thinking that they have made a mistake than they have for thinking that *we* have made a mistake. And the upshot, she claims, is that we are not disagreeing with each other when we say that X-ing is good, and they say that X-ing is not good. This, she says, demonstrates that the rigidifying move does not support a genuine moral realism.

Street seems to me to be right in maintaining that when we append the word 'good' to an action to which our imagined counterparts append the word 'bad', we are not disagreeing with one another and neither of us is making a mistake. But I don't see how it follows that a rigidified response-dependence does not yield a genuine moral realism. Street's mistake, I think, is to generalize too quickly from a plausible constraint on realism, in the actual world, to a constraint that she thinks must hold across possible worlds.

The plausible actual world constraint is this: if moral realism is true, then when two users of moral language conflict in their utterances (and their apparent disagreement cannot be explained away), at least one of them is wrong. Denial of this constraint straightforwardly yields relativism, which is widely taken to be incompatible with realism. But it doesn't follow, from this constraint, that moral realism is incompatible with cross-world conflicts in the concepts picked out by moral terms of the kind envisaged.

Consider the analogous conflict with colour terms. Here on Earth we use 'red' to refer to a certain property of objects, such that objects with that property cause normal observers in

normal conditions to judge that those objects are red. On twin-Earth, our counterparts might use 'red' to refer to a property of objects such that objects with that property would cause (actual) normal observers in normal conditions to judge that those objects are *green*. Clearly, the denizens of twin-Earth are not making a mistake or missing anything when they say that green objects are 'red'; just as clearly, when we say that green objects are 'green' we are not disagreeing with them. We are simply using different terms to refer to the same properties of objects: we have different concepts. Why should we not say the same about our moral concepts?

The reason why the constraint on actual world moral conflict holds is that it is false that we are using different concepts here on Earth. But it's not obvious that when there is apparent conflict in judgments across worlds, we cannot explain away the conflict simply by holding that we have different concepts. Of course, if we just say that we have different *moral* concepts, we give the game away: Street wins. But we have another option: we can deny that twin-Earthlings have moral concepts *at all*. When the differences between our use of evaluative language and theirs are so extensive, we are *not* disagreeing about the extension of the same concepts. Twin-Earthlings may have a pro-attitude toward baby-torturing, but this doesn't suffice to show that for them baby-torturing is morally good. They might even have practices of condemning and punishing non-baby torturers, and rewarding baby-torturers; we still should refuse to call their practices and concepts moral.⁵

Since there are, after all, accounts of moral concepts that preserve their objectivity without countenancing any non-natural properties, I conclude that the objectivity argument fails. At very least, proponents of the argument owe us a great deal more argument before we conclude that non-naturalism must be true if moral objectivity is to be salvaged.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have briefly examined three arguments designed to show that meaning in life requires the existence of God, perhaps coupled with the appropriate attitude toward Him. I have argued that none of these arguments is strong. Participation in God's plan can as plausibly be seen to be infantilizing as to be meaning-conferring, I suggested. The desire that some people experience to have the traces of their achievements persist indefinitely cannot be satisfied, regardless of God's existence, I argued. And there is no reason to think that the objectivity of morality requires the truth of a non-naturalistic account of moral concepts. I have not attempted to advance a naturalistic account of meaningfulness. So far as I can tell, however, extant naturalistic accounts remain plausible contenders; at any rate, I see no reason to think they will fare worse than supernaturalism.

Notes

- 1 Metz (2007a, 2007b) argues that on a God-centred account of life's meaning, a meaningful life requires 'a certain relationship with a spiritual realm'; that is, the truth of religious claims and acceptance of those claims are jointly necessary for meaning. I think this is a mistaken reading of the claims of some proponents of God-centred views. If the central reason why meaning requires God is (for instance) that only God can underwrite objective moral values (Cottingham 2005), then the truth of religion, coupled with a commitment to the furtherance of moral values, might be sufficient to confer meaning on an individual's life.
- 2 Metz (2000) argues that a plan theory should hold that it is God's perfections, for example His simplicity, atemporality, and infinitude which confer meaning on human life, but that these properties are incompatible with God's having purposes because having a purpose entails mutability and temporality. Metz's argument for the claim that meaningfulness is conferred by God's perfections depends on his excessively thin conception of the plan argument. On his conception of the argument, it is simply by

- orienting ourselves toward God that we acquire meaning. I do not think that this well captures the intuition of theists, who instead see meaning as arising from our playing *a role* in God's plans for the universe, where God's plan is a contentful blueprint or design (involving, say, the establishment of the kingdom of heaven on Earth, or the conversion of nonbelievers).
- 3 Similar considerations seem to apply to an independent argument for the requirement that there be a divine plan for life to be meaningful. According to this argument, which Metz (2007b) claims is as old as Ecclesiastes, a world in which the good go unrewarded and the bad unpunished is absurd. Metz considers this an argument for the need for an immortal soul, but it is better thought of as an argument for a divine plan which includes the setting right of wrongs. In any case, while it is clear that a world in which justice is done would be a better world than one in which it is not, it is obscure why all lives lack meaning if some injustices go uncorrected. Why should we not live meaningful lives by working towards justice, for instance?
 - 4 It is worth remarking that Street's Darwinian dilemma aims to demonstrate that there is no tenable moral realism, naturalistic or non-naturalistic. Street argues that non-naturalism lacks a coherent moral epistemology: either it must claim that we cannot know the content of moral facts, or it must admit that our access to this content is mediated by our evolved dispositions. The first option is obviously unacceptable, but the second is less parsimonious than the rival hypothesis that our evolved dispositions constitute – rather than merely allow us to discover – the content of moral facts. Thus the theist cannot comfortably appeal to Street's claims to motivate the objectivity argument.
 - 5 It might be noted that the claims advanced here commit me to disagreeing with Horgan and Timmons' (1992) influential argument against moral realism. They argue that new-wave moral realisms, of the kind advanced by Boyd (1988) and which model their defence of moral realism on a causal theory of reference, fail because the inhabitants of possible worlds in which (apparently) moral language is causally regulated by properties quite different from those that causally regulate such claims around here would be disagreeing with us when they claimed that (say) 'X-ing is wrong', where 'X-ing' is some action that we regard as permissible or obligatory. The fact of such disagreement they take to show that moral facts cannot be identical to the natural facts supposed to be causally regulating such claims. If this argument succeeds, then a rigidified response-dependent account of moral concepts will fail. Elsewhere (Levy 2011), I argue that their argument fails, for reasons similar to those appealed to here. Depending upon how the thought experiment is fleshed out, I claim, either the inhabitants of other possible worlds agree with us in their (only) apparently conflicting moral claims, or fail to disagree with us because they are not using moral concepts at all.

26

RELIGION AND SUFFERING

Michael P. Levine

[H]e maketh his sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust.

Matthew 5:45

Introduction

There is no aspect of human life more central to religion than that of suffering – and what an ‘aspect’ it is! Even where suffering is not taken to be the principal reason for religion, as it generally is by Freudians, Marxists, anthropologists (e.g. Clifford Geertz), sociologists (e.g. Emile Durkheim) and psychologists, it is seen as central. After all, what role would there be for religion generally and theism in particular (heaven, hell, grace, prayer, salvation), apart from suffering?

The brief for this chapter, as for all the chapters in the volume, is ‘to provide in-depth discussion of the current state of play and to make an original and cutting-edge contribution that significantly enhances debate’. This chapter is not a comprehensive account of recent work. However, along with examining specific arguments, it presents an overview that contemporary analytic philosophers of religion (apologists) will find objectionable. Better this than another ‘neutral’ summary. The literature on evil is as repetitive as it is vast.¹ If this chapter gives an accurate account of what the current state of play is with regard to suffering, which in analytic philosophy of religion focuses exclusively on the problem of evil, it will also have made a contribution that, though disputed, may enhance the debate.

In short, cumulative arguments from evil against the existence of God have been successful and therefore the ‘problem of evil’ is dead in the water.² This is not to say that suffering does not remain the central issue in religion. If this is right and no advancement has been made on the problem of evil in a long time – though just ‘how long’ as well as what is meant by ‘advancement’ is disputed – then making ‘an original and cutting-edge contribution to the debate’ is problematic. Nevertheless, if the chapter goes some way towards establishing the ‘dead in the water’ thesis, this will itself be something of a contribution. The claim here is that instead of progress, insight or innovation, there has been backsliding, repetition, and obfuscation. As we will see, many of these moves are morally problematic. Others (most) are interesting less for what they say about evil, than for illustrating the current state of analytic philosophy of religion.

Over the past sixty years or so, what used to be known, and is still better known, as the problem of suffering has morphed into quite a different problem – the problem of evil. This is largely due to contemporary analytic philosophy of religion's effort to contain, sanitize, and even obscure a problem that has long kept philosophers of religion on the back foot. Having nothing substantially new to say, they find ways of saying the same things over and over again. Where Leibniz talked about the 'best of all possible worlds', and Spinoza of our failure to understand or to see necessity in what occurs, van Inwagen, as we will see, talks about 'modal scepticism'.

'Evil' is an irreducibly theological term that is more abstract and metaphysical than 'suffering'.³ People are victims of evil and they do evil allegedly of their own free will because of some inherent flaw in their nature – a nature for which, despite being created, they somehow are responsible. They are also the victims of the many forms of physical evil – things like disease and earthquakes. On the other hand, suffering is something that both people and nature inflict, and that everyone, in varying degrees, must endure. Suffering is an existential problem while the problem of evil is largely its formulated logical counterpart, one which addresses a different set of concerns.

There are two principal points about recent treatments of the problem of evil which this chapter focuses on. The first is that the theodicies or partial theodicies offered are often immoral. The second is that contemporary theodicies are slight variations on well-established and soundly refuted strategies designed to deflect, if not defeat, the problem of evil. Thus, there are many variations on Leibniz's 'best of all possible worlds' theodicy, one that is itself an instance of the 'evil is necessary for a greater good' theodicy – but no advance.⁴

There is a great deal of truth in the claim that we can only properly understand how it is that we ought to live our lives if we properly understand the allegedly complex relationship between goodness and evil; and no one seriously doubts that evil may at times play a positive role in our lives. The question is: (i) whether there could not be even greater good(s) apart from the evils apparently necessary for certain goods; or (ii) whether all such evil was really necessary for greater good(s) since so much evil appears to be gratuitous. Why couldn't a theistic God have creatively achieved a world containing as much if not more goodness than this world of ours has, without the amount and types of evil present in the world?

From the theistic point of view, there is good reason to concern ourselves with the fact that evil may (does at times) result in good. Evil or suffering often brings about important acts of kindness, heroism and sacrifice, and is otherwise capable of providing conditions in which relationships may be deepened, the significance and meaning of one's own life revaluated for the better, and the like. That good can come from evil, and that we should try to see to it that good does come from evil, is hardly a matter for dispute. The question of course is whether, given the existence of a theistic God, all such evils are necessary for greater goods, and whether even greater (albeit different) goods could not come about apart from such evils.

There is a third theme in this chapter as well. There is a strategy on the part of theodicists like van Inwagen (1988, 1995a, 1995b, 1998a) and Marilyn Adams (2000, 2003) to make their solutions immune from any possible criticism. (Van Inwagen's so-called move from 'theodicy' to 'defence' is indicative of this.) Given the right set of premises or assumptions, this is not difficult to do. Van Inwagen's 'for all we know' strategy, one that relies on 'modal scepticism', is a good example. He claims that the empirical argument from evil, which claims that seemingly gratuitous evil makes it improbable that a theistic God exists, is misdirected since even genuinely gratuitous evil is no 'evidence' whatsoever against the existence, goodness, or power of God. He alleges that apart from every day and close at hand matters, we simply do not know what is possible or impossible. *For all we know*, laws of nature being what they are, much natural

evil simply happened necessarily. Van Inwagen's modal scepticism is designed specifically to address the problem to evil. Modal scepticism is not a theory he argues for prior to a discussion of evil but alongside it.⁵ It's the position that *could* do the job.

Marilyn Adams (2000, 2003), as we will see, also wishes to make her classical Christian theodicy, one that she alleges takes horrendous evils seriously, immune from criticism by ruling out those who wish to challenge either the premises or the plausibility of what she regards as the fundamentals of the Christian message of redemption. She is interested only in 'internal' cogency and consistency, which means she is really only speaking, and only intending to speak, to those who already more or less believe as she does. Her theodicy, as we will see, is one that is directed to those in the know, and one that makes assumptions that not even many believers would be willing to make. In short, such theodicy, like Leibniz's, attempts to provide solutions that are immune to falsification. Even though the 1950s positivists were mistaken in claiming that propositions immune to falsification were meaningless, the view that such invulnerability may undermine a proposition's plausibility and/or rationality may be sustained – as it is in the cases cited.

Penetrating analyses of the problem of evil can be found in essays by Mackie (1955) and McCloskey (1960).⁶ Although there are other accounts containing much the same material since that time, as well as some that significantly predate it, and although there have since been worthwhile restatements and reworking of basically the same points made in these essays (e.g., by William Rowe), there have been no significant advances. Mackie and McCloskey got it right.

Horrendous evil

Marilyn Adams (2000, 2003) recounts the Christian message of redemption in an afterlife as a response to the problem of evil. Preferring the term 'engulfs' rather than 'redemption' or 'defeat', Adams presupposes rather than argues that God through Christ will 'engulf' evil. She does not tell us how it will be done, and eschews any need to explain why there is such evil in the first place. If by 'engulf' she means 'defeat' or 'redeem' or (especially) 'justify' the evil, then her claim conflicts with what Ivan, in Dostoyevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, says is possible.⁷ Let's then begin with Marilyn Adams.

Dominated by a group of conservative religious academics engaged more in apologetics rather than philosophy, philosophy of religion is now largely a conversation they are having among themselves on their own terms. Marilyn Adams, for example, says, '[W]here the internal coherence of a system of religious beliefs is at stake, arguments for its inconsistency must draw on premisses (explicitly or implicitly) internal to that system or obviously acceptable to its adherents; likewise for successful rebuttals or explanations of consistency. ... As a Christian philosopher, I want to focus ... on the problem for the truth of Christianity raised by what I shall call "horrendous" evils.'⁸ Leaving aside the insuperable problem of finding premisses 'obviously acceptable to its adherents' (all Christians?), Adams's statement indicates a clear retreat to apologetics. We are not to question her premisses.

Richard Swinburne, Alvin Plantinga, Peter van Inwagen, Nicholas Wolterstorff, John Haldane, and others have established apologetics as the mainstay of contemporary analytic philosophy of religion. If they do balk at being taken for apologists (van Inwagen might not),⁹ it may be because they see apologetics as incompatible with philosophy proper. Apologetics assumes the truth of central religious claims and tries to find grounds on which to defend them. If the assumed truth conflicts with arguments to the contrary, it is the arguments that must go. Philosophy reverses this order. It seeks the truth by means of rational investigation – without presupposing what that truth may be.

Adams's remark about how the internal coherence of a system of religious beliefs is to be judged calls to mind Wittgensteinian fideism where truth claims are to be interpreted in the context of particular 'language games'. Adams, however, does not mention fideism since she interprets religious truth claims literally and unbound by any language game or form of life. She cannot tell us how God is able to redeem ('engulf') horrendous evil in such a way that the person suffering those evils will agree that on the whole their life is worthwhile – though she cites the life of Christ as an example. '[W]here horrendous evils are concerned, not only do we not know God's *actual* reason for permitting them; we cannot even *conceive* of any plausible candidate sort of reason consistent with worthwhile lives for human participants in them'. Nevertheless she claims that God is able '(a) to defeat any experienced horrors within the context of the participant's life, and (b) to give each created person a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole'.¹⁰

Contrary to John Stuart Mill,¹¹ Adams does not think that attributing 'goodness' to God in ways we cannot understand or in ways the term could not ordinarily be used, is an absolute equivocation on the idea of 'goodness' and may not even be intelligible. At least where moral matters are concerned, conceivability is a test of possibility since the meaning of moral is fixed by the ways in which we actually do *or conceivably could* use them. Contrary to Dostoyevsky's Ivan, who claims that the evil done to the child torn apart by the landlord's dogs cannot be redeemed or made right in the context of one's life as a whole, she thinks it can. Even if some great good were to come from such – and to suppose it *always* does is a supposition as ugly as it is silly, the evil itself could neither be termed good nor justified. Ivan's claim is that there is evil that is genuinely gratuitous and cannot (not merely *should not*) be seen as plausibly consistent with a theistic God.

Nor does Adams explain why a victim's agreeing that their life is a 'great good to him/her on the whole' should even count as a condition of the evil being engulfed (made right?). Believing that one's life has been a great good, despite being hacked to death or gassed alongside one's children, does not in any obvious way make it so. Nor does Adams consider that such a view may be morally offensive.

Arguably, Adams's theodicy is basically an unadorned reiteration of the Christian message of redemption – one with counterparts in orthodox Judaism and Islam. But this theodicy combined with her refusal to defend her premisses; address the 'why' question; or conjecture as to how such 'redemption' *can* take place, conflicts with a conception of persons as having intrinsic worth, and as rational, autonomous, free, self-determining (to a degree) moral agents. Adams says:

[I]t is not necessary to find logically possible reasons *why* God might permit ... [horrendous suffering] ... It is enough to show *how* God can be good enough to created persons despite their participation in horrors – by defeating them within the context of the individual's life and by giving that individual a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole.¹²

Has Adams shown 'how God can be good enough?' Raped, killed, and dismembered? Gassed and tortured? Forced to watch loved ones die horrible deaths? God will see to it (be 'good enough'), so that even the victims will agree it was all worthwhile. Do the religious believe this? This message of redemption conflicts with a more traditional and fundamental religious response to evil – that of Job's consternation and confusion. Given God's alleged goodness, knowledge, and power, evil is a mystery – on a par with the mystery of creation itself. God says to Job: 'Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?' (Job 38:4).

Adams's approach to the problem of horrendous evil rests on the distinction she draws between 'generic' and global approaches. These approaches:

defend divine goodness. ... by suggesting logically possible strategies for the global defeat of evils. But establishing God's excellence as a producer of global goods does not automatically solve the ... problem ... For God cannot be said to be good or loving to any created persons the positive meaning of whose lives He allows to be engulfed in and/or defeated by evils ... Yet, the only way unsupplemented global, and generic approaches could have to explain the latter, would be by applying their general reasons—why to particular cases of horrendous suffering. ... [Since] horrendous evil could be included in maximally perfect world orders; its being partially constitutive of such an order would assign it that generic and global positive meaning.¹³

She denies however that this solves the problem of evil. She asks rhetorically '[W]ould knowledge of such a fact defeat for a mother the *prima-facie* reason provided by her cannibalism of her own infant to wish that she had never been born?'¹⁴ Her answer is 'no'.

Is Adams's sharp distinction between global approaches and her own, which focuses on individuals, justified? Her approach requires that God does not allow any individual's life to be engulfed in evil. Yet one who claims that instances of evil are not incompatible with God since they may be necessary for a greater good, can and ordinarily does *also* claim that Adams's stipulation will likewise hold. Those who have suffered evil for a greater good will *also* accept that their own lives have been a great good. The 'supplement' to the global approach that Adams calls for is minor and one that, while not accepted by all those who take a global approach, easily could be. Thinking of Christ as a 'personal savior' does nothing to undermine the global approach. Adams's supplement, however, leaves us with the problems such a view raises. We do not and possibly cannot, understand how such evil can be 'engulfed' and – importantly – the claim that it can be is, or may be, morally offensive.

Theodicy takes a turn for the much worse

Despite being at least *prima facie* immoral, much contemporary analytic theodicy has, at least since the days of Bertrand Russell, managed to elude critical moral examination.¹⁵ Consider, for example, the morally problematic ways in which horrendous evil (e.g., genocide) has been dealt with. Do they differ in kind from arguments by Islamic, Jewish, Hindu, and other fanatics on behalf of the extraordinary violence and terror that are so quickly and universally and soundly denounced in the West?

Suppose I were to tell you that there are professors at major universities that offer a defence of genocide on theological and ethical grounds. I do not mean that they endorse genocide. I mean only that they argue that in permitting horrendous evil, God would be doing nothing that is necessarily ethically wrong. The claim that God would be doing nothing immoral in allowing genocide could (or should?) be seen as claiming not only that genocide could be morally justifiable, but that given that genocide has occurred, and assuming that God has allowed it to occur, it has been justified whether for a greater good or for some other reason.¹⁶ Individuals who carried out such genocide would be acting immorally. But the claim is that even if God permitted it when he was capable of preventing it, God would not be morally culpable. It is assumed that the greater goodness of free will outweighs it. Whether those responsible for horrendous evil should be regarded as morally culpable when they are allegedly created by God remains an important question – one not recently discussed.

There is no shortage of morally problematic treatments of evil. Consider one that predates and is similar to Marilyn Adams's view. George Schlesinger says,

A is permitted to cause another person suffering, with the view of providing opportunities for others to respond in a noble way, only if A is absolutely certain that he is capable of compensating the victim fully for his suffering. By fully compensating I mean that the victim will eventually agree that the experience of having to undergo the suffering ... together with the subsequent experience of receiving compensation, are no less preferable to the experience of having neither. It is obvious that only God is in the position to guarantee this.¹⁷

One question is whether logically speaking God is capable of guaranteeing the requisite compensation to the person. Suppose the victim does not agree? In the case of genocide, what might the 'stated goal' and compensation be? Could the stated goal ('providing opportunities for others to respond in a noble way') not be reached by any other means?

Suppose the victim does agree; the thief agrees that cutting off his hand is proper punishment and that one-handed living under such a regime was adequate compensation. Whether or not the victim agrees is beside the point. The question is whether A acted morally in causing or allowing such suffering. Whether the victim *should* agree depends on whether A acted morally. J.S. Mill and Dostoyevsky argue that, in the case of some evils, God could not have acted morally. Schlesinger gives no reason to suppose that his justification for conditions under which 'A is permitted to cause another person suffering', is not as applicable to genocide as it is to those cases in which we readily agree a greater good is to be had in virtue of such suffering.

If Schlesinger's reasoning were sound we might have a possible solution to at least one aspect of the problem of evil. As it stands, we have both a failed theodicy as well as an immoral justification of genocide. Filling in content without modifying the structure of Schlesinger's argument we have:

[God] is permitted to cause another person suffering [e.g., have that person and their family tortured], with the view of providing opportunities for others [Nazis, 'righteous' Christians, the American Red Cross and Allied military forces?] to respond in a noble way, only if ... [God] is absolutely certain that he is capable of compensating the victim [the tortured] fully for his suffering ... I mean that the victim will eventually agree that the experience of ... suffering [e.g., the person and their family tortured, gassed, mutilated], ... [God] subjected him to ... together with the subsequent experience of receiving compensation [Can these things be compensated for?], are no less preferable to the experience of having neither [that is, neither the gassing nor the compensation] ... only God is in the position to guarantee this.

If it seems outlandish to suppose that Schlesinger's argument is meant as a justification for genocide, think again. Those I am discussing have just this kind of case in mind. Richard Swinburne holds a position similar to Schlesinger. Swinburne says:

It is because being of use is a good for him who is of use and increases his well-being, that when someone's suffering is the means by which they are of use that the net negative weight of their suffering-and-being-of-use is not nearly as great as it would otherwise be; and so our Creator ... has the right to use us to a limited extent for the sake of some good to others. Kant was surely correct to emphasise that one must treat

individuals as moral ends in themselves and not use them for the good of others. But the latter phrase must be interrupted as 'on balance'. It is permissible to use someone for the good of others if on balance you are their benefactor, and if they were in no position to make the choice for themselves.¹⁸

Despite the centrality of deontological/Kantian ethics to much Christian ethics (e.g., 'treat people as ends in themselves', etc.), Swinburne (like many another) wears his Kantianism on his sleeve. Even if one does (sensibly) agree that it is not always wrong to use someone for the good of others, one has to look at the cases Swinburne has in mind for his theodicy – those like genocide rather than uncontentious cases where no serious harm befalls the person used and a great good comes from it. What does Swinburne mean by 'limited extent' in the above? The idea that it was not wrong to butcher the child in front of the mother because it will benefit the butcher is ... well, what can one say? Even to consequentialists, Swinburne's justification will be rejected as a misguided and offensive parody.

Van Inwagen's defence of a similar principle is as bad. Van Inwagen rejects the following principle both as a universal moral principle and as it applies to God – at least in certain circumstances: 'It is wrong to allow something bad to happen to X – without X's permission – in order to secure some benefit for others (and no benefit for X)'.¹⁹ He says,

The circumstances in which it is most doubtful are these: The agent is in a position of lawful authority over both X and the 'others' and is responsible for their welfare ... the good to be gained by the 'others' is considerably greater than the evil suffered by X; there is no way in which the good for the 'others' can be achieved ... we might consider cases of quarantine or of the right of eminent domain ... It is not to the point to protest that these cases are not much like cases involving an omnipotent God ... They are counterexamples to the above moral principle, and therefore, that moral principle is false.²⁰

Relevant moral differences between cases of quarantine and eminent domain on the one hand, and genocide and torture on the other are not hard to find, especially when the agent is God. It is therefore very much to the point 'to protest that these cases are not much' alike. Why state the principle in question as universally applicable when doing so begs the question and the point of the principle? Van Inwagen must be aware of this and yet he disguises polemic as reasoned argument.

Does van Inwagen think that the conditions he cites as invalidating the moral principle are met in the case of horrendous evil? Is 'the good to be gained by the "others" considerably greater than the evil suffered by X'? If he does not think so then some other account of why God would allow such evil needs to be given. (Elsewhere he argues that for all we know things *had to happen* as they did – i.e. God could not have made them happen otherwise – which would surely solve the problem.) In the case of quarantine or eminent domain it could be argued that the individuals involved are still treated as ends in themselves.²¹ Can this be argued in the case of, say, genocide? The former inflict comparatively trivial harm to an individual. Quarantine passes a Kantian universalizability test. Each of us desires that others with a deadly and highly contagious disease separate themselves from the population, and any reasonable person understands that this desire commits us to accepting that we ought to be quarantined in such a case as well. By contrast, few sane people desire that others face torture and death so that the rest may have a chance to prove their heroism. And if van Inwagen's examples are to satisfy his stipulated conditions, then doesn't a moderately plausible case have to be made that 'the good

to be gained by the “others” is considerably greater than the evil suffered by X ... [and that] there is no way in which the good for the “others” can be achieved?”

Van Inwagen, Swinburne and others seem to have taken Rom. 9:20f. to heart. ‘Who are you, sir, to answer God back? Can the pot speak to the potter and say, “Why did you make me like this?” Surely the potter can do what he likes with the clay. Is he not free to make use of the same lump two vessels, one to be treasured, the other for common use?’ God can do what he likes but would not necessarily be ethical in doing so. God commanding or doing something cannot make it right. That is the point of the Euthyphro problem. Rom. 9:20f. does not explicitly say that God would be ethical in doing *whatever* ‘he likes with the clay’, though this seems to be its meaning. Commenting on Rom. 9, Karl Barth (1886/1968) says

According to human conceptions such a God can be described only as a ‘Despot’ ... and men are bound to rebel against his tyranny. But he whom men would not naturally wish to name ‘God’ *is*, nevertheless, God. Through the knowledge of God which is in Christ, he whom men name ‘Despot’ (Lk. ii. 29, Acts iv. 24, etc.), is known and loved as the eternal, loving Father. ... There is no road to the knowledge of God which does not run along the precipitous edge of this contradiction.²²

If this is meant as a justification of evil by authority or some other means, then it is just what Dostoyevsky’s Ivan, and J.S. Mill, reject.

Van Inwagen’s consequentialist views rest on moral principles antithetical to sensible Consequentialism – one that preserves certain duties towards individuals. Christian moral theory rejects such a latitudinous Consequentialism altogether. The contention that people can morally be used in ways these theodicies suggest is a justification in principle of *all* horrendous evil. It is a pattern of reasoning much the same as that denounced in the West (and elsewhere) as religious extremism that is linked to violence.

Van Inwagen does not think he is equivocating on the meaning of moral terms but he is. In an exuberant footnote he says, ‘when we no longer see through a glass darkly, when we know as we are known, when God’s sorrows are made manifest to us, we shall see that we have never felt anything that we could, without shame, describe as sorrow’.²³ How could what we call ‘sorrow’ not really be ‘sorrow’? Van Inwagen’s view entails a peculiar and pernicious global moral scepticism. If *this* does not count as sorrow what does? That God may suffer more than ordinary people does not entail, as van Inwagen implies, that the mother in Ivan’s tale will be *ashamed* at describing as sorrow what she previously felt at seeing her child ripped to shreds by the landlord’s dogs. On his account, the victims of hideous evil do not feel anything that they could ‘without shame’ call sorrow – or so they will one day come to see. Tell a concentration camp or torture victim that their suffering is not real – in order to win them over no less!

This view distorts Christian theodicy and affirms what Ivan and Mill deny is possible; that once one no longer sees ‘as through a glass darkly’ we will see how and why God is just and things we thought evil really are not. For Ivan, for this to be possible, we should be able to imagine a scenario in which the evil that occurs can be properly understood as good, perhaps when seen *sub specie aeternitatis* or from a God’s eye perspective. But Ivan, contrary to Adams, Swinburne, van Inwagen, and Schlesinger, claims this is impossible. No reward, no retribution, no change in perspective, can make it good or right.

Van Inwagen claims ‘that the patterns of suffering that exist in the actual world do not constitute even a *prima facie* case [i.e., “evidence”] against theism’.²⁴ This position is a repudiation of the traditional theistic problem of evil since both the existential and logical dimensions

of the problem are generated by recognizing that suffering does constitute a serious *prima facie* case against theism. Whatever one wants to say about Job's consternation or Ivan's rebellion, on a traditional theistic account they were not simply confused or unenlightened in thinking that evil constituted a case against theism. Van Inwagen's assertion is as misleading as it is aberrant since he does not deny that evil presents a *prima facie* 'difficulty' for theism – but rather denies that evil constitutes *prima facie* 'evidence' against theism.²⁵ Yet surely the *prima facie* 'difficulty' is generated by the *prima facie* evidence 'against' – whether or not that evidence proves to be anything more than *prima facie*?

Van Inwagen takes on this objection and asks, '[I]f a phenomenon is a "difficulty" for a certain theory, does not that mean that it is evidence against that theory? Or if it is not evidence against that theory, in what sense can it raise a "difficulty" for that theory? Are you not saying that it can be right to accept a theory to which there is counterevidence when there are competing theories to which there is no counterevidence?'²⁶ But the fact that it may be right 'to accept a theory to which there is counterevidence when there are competing theories to which there is no counterevidence' obfuscates the specific issue. Van Inwagen conflates 'evidence' against a theory with the question of criteria for accepting or rejecting a theory. Who maintains that one should reject a theory merely because there is some evidence against it? Nothing in his account of why it is important or practicable to accept some theories when 'faced with phenomena that make the advocates of the theory a bit uncomfortable'²⁷ supports his distinction between 'difficulty' and 'evidence'. He is using 'evidence', or rather 'evidence against', as synonymous with 'evidence that in fact renders a particular theory improbable given what we know'. This is prescriptive, peculiar, and *ad hoc*.

What van Inwagen means by 'difficulty' turns out to be nothing more than evidence that proves to be *prima facie* evidence. *Prima facie* evidence is however evidence nonetheless, and empirical arguments from evil seek to show that the evidence from evil is not just *prima facie* given what we know or have good reason to believe.²⁸ Moreover, it is a gross distortion of the problem of evil to suggest that theists are simply 'faced with phenomena [evil] that make the advocates of the theory [theism] a bit uncomfortable'.

Van Inwagen misleadingly states another thesis that proves to be innocuous. 'I argue that – from the point of view of traditional theism – among the states of affairs that have no explanation is the existence of evil: sin and death and disease ... I argue also that many particular evils ... [the rabies virus]. ... have no explanation. (That is: the existence of these things is not a matter of metaphysical necessity; neither God nor any other rational being decreed or willed or brought about their existence.'²⁹) But to say that 'the existence of these things is not a matter of metaphysical necessity' is a far cry from suggesting that from the point of view of traditional theism, the existence of evil itself or particular evils 'have no explanation'. The point of theodicy is to provide justification *cum* explanation for them.

Van Inwagen says:

[T]hese difficulties do not render ... [theists'] beliefs irrational ... they can acknowledge the difficulties. ... [and] they might go on to offer some speculations about the causes of the phenomena that raise the difficulties ... [and about the] reasons God might have for allowing evil. Such speculations need not be (they almost certainly will not be) highly probable on the '-ism' in whose defence they are employed. And they need not be probable on anything that is known to be true, although they should not be improbable on anything that is known to be true. They are to be offered as explanations of the difficult phenomena that are, *for all anyone knows*, the correct ones. In sum, the way to deal with such difficulties is to construct defences ... To show that

an acknowledged difficulty with a theory is not evidence against it, it suffices to construct a defence that accounts for the facts that raise the difficulty.³⁰

Constructing a 'defence' that accounts for the facts that raise the difficulty will only suffice to show that an acknowledged difficulty with a theory is not evidence against it if the defence is not improbable. But what empirical arguments seek to establish is the improbability, given what we know, of so-called defences or theodicies. His own defence/theodicy concerning natural evil is a remarkably improbable fantasy against knowledge of science and history.³¹

Van Inwagen appears to be claiming that the theist is committed, *a priori*, not to allow any evil to count as evidence against theism. One can *always* construct defences given people's divergent views about what is improbable. But Ivan's point, along with Mill and others, is that the evil *must* count. When faced with the 'difficulty' or evidence that evil presents for the theist, why should the strategy of the theist be to construct defences? Neither Ivan nor Job adopted such a strategy and both denied that as far as they could tell, there can be a rational solution to the problem. Their strategy was to existentially take the problem on – to take it seriously.

Van Inwagen's treatment of natural evil is even more difficult to take seriously than Plantinga's.³² In attributing natural evil to the devil, Plantinga reduces natural evil to a type of moral evil. Although the notion of the devil as a person to be reckoned with has faded, it is not difficult to see how it might be regarded seriously in a context in which one believes in angels and exorcisms. But van Inwagen's story conflicts head-on with science, cosmology and history. He claims that (i) natural events like tornadoes were present even before the Fall, and (ii) for all we know, were and still are, necessarily present given what the laws of nature must be. He claims that (ii) has support from scientists.³³ He couples the plausible assertion that tornadoes and certain viruses are not evil in themselves with the farfetched (implausible) claim that tornadoes etc. resulted in evil only after the Fall. He alleges that due to Man's separation from God, Man became cognitively impaired in a way that Man was no longer able to avoid tornadoes and killer viruses.

While he claims that he regards the creation story of Adam and Eve as a myth, it is hard to see how his account of natural evil can be consistent with what we know about the evolution of the species and history of the earth, etc.³⁴ Just what aspect of the creation story does van Inwagen regard as a myth if he claims that there actually were people who, before the Fall, were able to avoid harmful killer viruses, landslides and earthquakes? Does the archaeological, geological and evolutionary biological evidence support such claims? Van Inwagen has entered, or has never left, the world of creation science – a world that fails to provide a basis for a plausible theodicy.³⁵

Returning to the issue of evidence, van Inwagen says 'if there is no least amount of evil that would serve whatever purposes an all-powerful and perfectly good being might have in allowing the existence of evil of the kinds and in more or less the amounts that actually exist, then such a being might very well allow particular evils that are individually pointless'.³⁶ There may be 'no least amount' but the significant objection is that qualitatively and/or quantitatively *less* would suffice for any imaginable purpose God may have. What drives the argument is that far too much evil appears to be otiose. That there may be (is) 'no least amount' is irrelevant to empirical arguments which claim that given the kinds and amount of evil that exist, it is implausible to suppose that God exists.

Modal scepticism is 'the thesis that we are largely ignorant of modal matters that are remote from the concerns of everyday life'.³⁷ Not only is van Inwagen's introduction of modal scepticism *ad hoc*, it is also unfalsifiable; designed to forever do away with the problem of natural evil by claiming that natural evil is the necessary product of necessary laws.

Van Inwagen denies that modal intuitions (beliefs about what is and is not possible) based on introspection are reliable. After all, if we did have reason to believe that the laws of nature could be otherwise than they are – for example, if they could be such that there were never any killer viruses – then it would seem that God could and would have chosen those more congenial alternate laws. Van Inwagen argues we have no such reason:

[W]e have some sort of capacity to know modal truths about familiar matters. I know that it is possible that – there is no intrinsic impossibility in its being the case that – the table that was in a certain position at noon have then been two feet to the left ... But I should say that we have no sort of capacity ... to know whether. ... it is necessary that the laws of physics have the same structure as the actual laws ... [P]hilosophers who think they can ... determine by some sort of intellectual insight whether they are possible are fooling themselves. ... It hardly follows that, because a certain thing cannot be proved to be impossible by a certain method, it is therefore possible in any sense of ‘possible’ whatever.³⁸

Who claims that ‘because a certain thing cannot be proved to be impossible by a certain method, it is therefore possible?’ The general assumption is that if a concept or state of affairs is not logically impossible, then it is logically possible. Van Inwagen says ‘if you think that it would be possible to design a planet, and a universe to contain it, that was both capable of supporting human life and contained no earthquakes or tornadoes, I can only point out that you have never tried’.³⁹ The claim here is that *for all we know*, it is necessary that the laws of physics have the same structure as the actual laws, and that natural evil necessarily results from these necessary laws. It is an embrace of Leibniz’s ‘best of all possible worlds’ theodicy.⁴⁰

If God could not create the world with laws of nature other than they in fact are, then the physical evil that results from them does nothing to impugn God’s moral goodness, omnipotence, omniscience. Van Inwagen’s initial argument for modal scepticism consists of the claim that since what we can and cannot conceive of is unclear, conceivability cannot be a guide to possibility. None of the philosophical literature on the modal status of laws of nature is referred to.⁴¹

But once the question of ‘possibility’ is distinguished from knowing what is possible or impossible, or the possibility of knowing what is possible, then van Inwagen will have to offer more than the hypothesis of modal scepticism to prove that what we take to be *prima facie* possible is not really possible, let alone that ‘there is no such thing as logical possibility’. Until we have *arguments* rather than conjectures to offer on behalf of modal scepticism, arguments that would break down any distinction between nomic and logical necessity, and the relation between logical impossibility and possibility as it is currently ordinarily understood; why accept the view that there cannot be a world much like ours without killer viruses?

Van Inwagen’s assumption that we do not know ‘how we know’ something is possible even in everyday matters, seems false. We know that it is possible for the table to be two feet to the left of where it is because (like Hume) we can see that there is no contradiction in supposing it. At other times we ‘compare’ ideas or examine whether beliefs we hold may entail or imply something that could not possibly be the case. Van Inwagen has not shown that the way we determine everyday modal matters is different in kind from how we do so in speculative, non-everyday matters.

Note that, given Mill’s view on equivocation, Ivan’s moral scepticism is impervious to modal scepticism. Even granting modal scepticism, one would still not be able to regard certain states of affairs as ‘good’. Even if God necessarily had to create a world, if he was to create at all, in which laws of nature and human failing resulted in evil; then we would still have to assert that the state of affairs we now call evil, we would still call evil – and that whatever else God may be, God could not without equivocation be called ‘good’.

R.M. Adams on love and the problem of evil

Let's examine one additional, albeit partial, theodicy – that of R.M. Adams – that illustrates the three principal points of this chapter: (i) recent theodicies are terribly immoral; (ii) such theodicies are slight variations on well-established and soundly refuted theodicies designed to deflect, if not resolve, the problem of evil; and (iii) contemporary theodicians have sought (unsuccessfully) to make their solutions immune from any possible criticism (i.e., unfalsifiable).

Consider the following two principles formulated by Adams.⁴²

- (**R**) If a state of affairs q is a necessary condition for a state of affairs p , then if one does not (or ought not rationally to) regret that p , one ought not rationally to regret that q .
- (**R**★) If a state of affairs q is a necessary condition for a state of affairs p , then if one does not (or ought not rationally to) wish, all things considered, that not- p , one ought not rationally to wish, all things considered, that not- q .

Adams rightfully rejects **R**. If killing is necessary for my existence and I do not regret my existence, this does not mean that I ought not or do not regret the killing. Adams is glad he exists while regretting World War I which was, let us assume, a causally necessary condition for his existence. We can rationally regret evils that were causally necessary to bring about p without regretting p .

Adams contrasts cases of conditionally favorable attitudes (for example, I would like the job provided I did not have to hurt others to get it), with those where we (allegedly) have an 'unconditionally' favorable attitude towards some state of affairs, such as one's existence, and where that state of affairs is causally necessarily connected to some prior evil. In these cases, is it rational to regret the bad state of affairs that we suppose is necessarily connected to that to which we have the unconditionally favorable attitude? Supposing it is rational to regret the bad in such cases, is it also rational to *wish* that the bad never happened? (See **R**★.)

Adams does not distinguish between causal or nomic (law-like) necessity and logical necessity, even though, if they were distinguished, different responses to the questions posed may be in order. It might, for example, make sense to wish for x where x is nomically impossible, but logically possible. What one might be obliquely wishing for in such a case is that the causal link be severed: that the laws of nature did not operate as they ordinarily do.

Here then is an essential part of Adams's theodicy: we should have an unconditionally favorable attitude towards the existence of those we love, even towards those whose existence is necessarily (causally) connected to prior bad events. Contrary to **R**, we should have an attitude of regret towards the bad things necessary for our own or a loved one's existence. However, on the basis of **R**★, which Adams accepts, 'one ought not rationally to wish, *all things considered* [my emphasis], that not- q ' (e.g., that World War I did not happen), but instead to assume an attitude of 'ambivalence' towards it.

The significant question in such a case is, *supposing* such necessary causal connections, should one ever adopt such 'unconditional' attitudes? Does love really demand it? I love Y very much – but not so much (I hope) that I would be willing to say that Y should exist even if the cost of it is untold misery. No love should be 'unconditional' in these ways. The argument from evil claims that it is highly improbable or impossible to suppose such connections between good and evil are logically necessary – that things *could not* be different, even if they are causally necessary in the circumstances. A theistic God could and would have seen to it, could see to it, that causal conditions were other than they in fact were.

Adams appears to implicitly endorse van Inwagen's modal scepticism and then assumes that, for all we know, separating the evil (World War I) from the good (his beloved's existence) is

not possible. We are then told that given an ‘all things considered’ perspective towards a good that is necessarily connected to a prior bad state of affairs, our attitude towards them considered together should be one of ambivalence. He does not question whether morally speaking we ever should have such unconditional attitudes, or even whether we do. Nor does he question whether God could have achieved the good without the bad, assuming, like Leibniz and van Inwagen, that it is (causally and/or logically) impossible. This partial theodicy is therefore question-begging. But more importantly, it is perverse.

Adams says that principle **R**★ is ‘much more plausible than (**R**)’:

As I understand (**R**★), indeed, it seems to be a condition of coherence in wishing. For I take it that *wishing, all things considered*, that not-*q* is wishing away *q* and everything of which *q* is a necessary condition, and not wishing, all things considered, that not-*p* is not wishing away either *p* or any of its necessary conditions. In these terms we can frame our main issue: is it important, for the fullness of love, *not* to wish, all things considered, that the beloved not have existed?⁴³

Adams asks ‘Is it not monstrous to regard our individual existences as more important than the horrors of that conflict [World War I]?’⁴⁴ If by ‘unconditional’ or ‘all things considered’ one is saying that our individual existences are worth a World War, then the answer is, Yes. The fullness of love, as Adams describes it, is a horrifically selfish love – and something all too often acted upon.

If *q* (the murder of millions) is a necessary condition of *p* (my existence), then ‘all things considered’ I likely would, and certainly should, rationally wish that not-*p*. This is because *p* would entail the prior occurrence of *q*, which is the event I wish not to have happened. This does not entail that I could not or should not therefore regret the state of affairs of my not existing, nor does it entail my wishing or ‘having to wish’ to not exist, or my regretting the fact that the *q* and *p* are necessarily linked *and* wishing they were not. By ‘all things considered’, Adams does not mean all things considered. The ‘unconditional’ pushes all else aside.

R★ is not a condition of coherence in wishing. Wishing, *all things considered*, that not-*q* (that World War I did not occur) is not the same as wishing away *q* and everything of which *q* is a necessary condition. Wishing is not constrained by causal (nomic) necessity. I can imagine Adams absent World War I, and I can imagine Helen Keller – as Adams claims not to be able to – with 20/20 vision and superb hearing.⁴⁵ Imagination, rather than causal possibility, is a necessary condition of wishing, and imagination is not even governed by logical, let alone causal, necessity. Wishing can ignore any such alleged causally necessary connections between bad and good.

What exactly is it that Adams is pondering with regard to the fact that good comes from evil? For Adams, it illustrates how God works in mysterious ways. Great goods result from evils in ways we do not always know of and perhaps cannot conceive. This is a default (‘for all we know’) theodicy; one that resolves the alleged problem of evil by writing a blank cheque. It does not address the empirical argument from evil but ignores it.

Adams has a ‘horse and carriage’ theodicy. Evil and the good go together like ‘a horse and carriage’. You can’t have one without the other. But that things could have been different, that the causal connections Adams sees as inviolable are not so, is what believers and non-believers alike have for the most part believed.

‘All-things-considered’ evaluations involve taking an attitude towards, or setting a value on, complexes that include both goods and evils. This is the kind of evaluation Adams thinks we should take to evils generally or at least to those from which a good, like one’s own existence, comes. But why not ‘evaluate each event in itself, rejoicing and regretting without regard to the causal connections’ – which is in fact what we generally do? There is no ambivalence nested

in this response. Adams, however, appears to presuppose some kind of ‘all things considered’ event ontology (and corresponding attitude ascription) that bundles conceptually distinct events on the basis of often quite remote causal connectedness, and insists that only a single attitude is appropriate. Adams’s ontology claims that causally linked events should not properly be regarded as distinct. The view is reminiscent of Jonathan Edwards’s (1703–58) claim that punishing Adam and Eve’s progeny for Adam’s transgressions is not immoral because God views Adam and his descendants as a single person. God’s view of personal identity is different from our own.

Metz refutes Adams by pointing out that ‘wishes’ do not ‘track relations of possibility and necessity’. He is right, but his critique, as well as that of Samantha Vice,⁴⁶ does not touch the moral objection to Adams’s argument, which astonishingly claims that ‘love’ would prevent us from rationally wishing horrors like World War I never happened. There is such a thing as ‘sick love’, and the kind of love Adams describes is an instance of it.

Conclusion

Theodicies that claim genocide may be morally permissible and comprehensible from a theistic point of view, are as radical as those the West condemns. Are the philosophers discussed here saying anything very different from those at ‘illiberal’ Islamic or Jewish universities about God’s goodness in relation to the world?

But the moral objection is only part of it. I have also cited a lack of ‘seriousness’ on the part of contemporary theodicy. Ivan is serious. Job is serious. Van Inwagen and the others are not; but why? The chapter began with the claim that there is no aspect of human life more central to religion than that of suffering; and that religion’s task is in no small part to address that problem in ways that are of concern to the believer. By refusing to acknowledge that there is an existential as well as a logical dimension to the problem, contemporary analytic theodicy fails.

The situation reminds one of Kierkegaard’s story of the ‘knight of faith’ who turns out to be not the priest or person in church every Sunday, but the one you would least expect – the paradigm of this-worldliness – the ‘tax-collector’.⁴⁷ Kierkegaard claimed that the pagan, or simple farmer who has never even heard of Christ, can be more ‘in the truth’, more ‘inward’ and ‘subjective’, than those who make religion a business (for example, the sanctimonious and allegedly devout clergy). With regard to suffering, it is the religious rank and file that have found ways, not always successful, and not once and for all; but ones that take Job and Ivan at their word. By contrast, the theodicies we have just looked at are anaemic and pale logical incarnations of a problem the religious neither face nor care about.

While ‘the problem of evil’ was once worth pursuing, that particular ship has sailed. On that ship were theologians, poets, novelists, dramatists, artists, and many philosophers. William Rowe may have been the last up the gangway. But the problem of evil is now a mug’s game (‘a futile or unprofitable endeavor’). Evil remains religiously and existentially problematic. For the religious, it should at times test faith along with an understanding of scripture. As an intellectual problem, however, it has been exhausted and resolved. Reiteration after reiteration; old wine in still old or slightly newer bottles, does not constitute philosophical advance. Become a student of the problem of evil if you must, but all you will find are anachronisms, alongside a new generation of apologists digging in their heels.

Notes

1 For an overview, see Taliaferro (1998: 299–322) and Peterson (1983).

2 Most notable among relatively recent arguments is Rowe’s empirical argument – also called the ‘evidential’, ‘probabilistic’, and ‘inductive’ argument. See Rowe (1986, 1988).

- 3 See Levine (2006).
- 4 Ninian Smart (1961) argues that the world would have to be almost incomprehensibly different if it contained no evils, or rather no evils of a particular kind. Smart's essay is the earliest modern precursor I know of to Tabensky's (2009) concern with the non-religious positive function of evil.
- 5 See van Inwagen (1998b). See also the recent collection of essays on the problem of evil in the *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, volume 70, 2011. Each of the three principal points focused on in this chapter is amply illustrated across the five essays in this collection. Bishop's (2011) claim that the logical argument is dead, reiterated in Hall's (2011) editorial preface, is argued against in this chapter and in Levine (2000).
- 6 See, for example, McCloskey's discussion of the view that evil is necessary for us to recognize, understand, or appreciate goodness. This epistemological theme is also taken up in Tabensky (2009). It is a favorite with students: 'Without evil there would be no way of knowing what is good', etc.
- 7 Feodor Dostoyevsky (1964: 16).
- 8 Adams (2003: 408).
- 9 See van Inwagen (1998a).
- 10 Adams (2003: 410).
- 11 See Mill (1865/1964: 37–45).
- 12 Adams (2003: 411).
- 13 Ibid. 409.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 There are reasons for this. First, philosophy of religion is of little interest to most analytic philosophers. Second, if the morally pernicious views discussed here are representative, and the field is dominated by those who hold them, then it is unlikely that the criticisms levelled in this chapter would be seen as having merit.
- 16 For a psychoanalytic account of the prejudices that underlie violence and that can help explain such claims, see Young-Breuhl (1996, 2004). For arguments concerning intrinsic connections between some religious belief and violence, see Pataki (2007).
- 17 See Schlesinger (1988: 51–52). Schlesinger's thesis regarding compensation is virtually identical to the principal thesis in Marilyn McCord Adams (2000, 2003).
- 18 Swinburne 1995: 87.
- 19 van Inwagen 1995a: 121–22.
- 20 Ibid. 121–22.
- 21 Kai Nielsen (1973: 38–41) argues that the idea of God having created man for a purpose (e.g., fellowship with God) is 'offensive in that it involves treating man as a kind of tool or artefact. It is degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose'. Nielsen seems to me to be mistaken since the idea is that in creating humans with such a purpose and in fulfilling such a purpose humans would be fulfilling their own good ends as well. But van Inwagen's account is different. In his theodicy people really are tools. There is no identification between their ends and the ends of others they unwillingly serve.
- 22 Karl Barth 1933: 350.
- 23 Peter van Inwagen 1995a: 120, n14.
- 24 Peter van Inwagen 1995b: 66–95, 70n6.
- 25 Ibid. 92–95.
- 26 Ibid. 93.
- 27 Ibid. 93.
- 28 Rowe (1986: 227) says, 'It is one thing to argue that the existence of evil is logically incompatible with the existence of the theistic God and quite another thing to argue that the world contains evils that render the existence of the theistic God unlikely. The former is the logical argument from evil; the latter is the empirical argument from evil.'
- 29 Van Inwagen (1995a: 15).
- 30 Van Inwagen (1995b: 93–94).
- 31 Van Inwagen (1995a: 106) claims that his account of natural evil being a result of the Fall is a kind of 'just-so story'. Is it a just-so story or is it an actual historical event? On van Inwagen's account the two are not incompatible. 'Dennett's just-so stories are tales told to illustrate possibility, tales told against a background that may be described as the standard model of evolution. My just-so story is of a similar sort, but the "background" is provided by what I have described as "the data of Christian revelation"' (see van Inwagen 1995a: 106 n.7). Van Inwagen is claiming that it is 'not improbable' that this is what

- happened given the ‘data’ of revelation. What are the grounds for believing that before rebelling against God, Adam and Eve or our ancestors knew how to avoid earthquakes and killer viruses?
- 32 Plantinga (1974a).
 - 33 Van Inwagen (1995b: 78–81).
 - 34 Van Inwagen says, ‘To allay the possible curiosity of some readers, I will mention that I regard the story of Adam and Eve in Genesis as a myth, in the sense that, in my view, it is not a story that has come down to us via a long historical chain of tellings and retellings that originated with the testimony of participants in the events it describes. In my view, the rebellion of creatures against God happened far too long ago for any historical memory of it to have survived to the present day’ (van Inwagen 1995a: 100n.4).
 - 35 Van Inwagen disclaimers appear somewhat less remarkable after reading his account of natural evil. He says (1995a: 97) ‘I do not claim to be the first human being in history to have fathomed God’s purposes. Nor do I claim to be the recipient of a special revelation from God; I do not claim to be a prophet whom God has charged with the task of disseminating an explanation of His ways. The method of this essay is simply philosophical reflection on the data of Christian revelation – or, more exactly, on what one tradition holds (in my view, correctly) to be the data of Christian revelation’. Van Inwagen is not specific about the ‘data of Christian revelation’ or tradition he is referring to. See Levine (1998) for a critique of Wolterstorff (1995)’s account of Locke’s ‘wax-nose’ problem and biblical interpretation.
 - 36 Van Inwagen (1995a: 18).
 - 37 Van Inwagen (1995a: 11). Also see Smart (1961).
 - 38 Van Inwagen (1995a: 12–13).
 - 39 Van Inwagen (1995a: 106).
 - 40 Leibniz (1710). The idea that this is ‘the best of all possible worlds’ was satirized by Voltaire in *Candide, ou l’Optimisme* (1767), which was banned for blasphemy.
 - 41 Others have since taken up arguments concerning modal scepticism. See Hawke (2011), Geirsson (2005), Stalnaker (2002), Sosa (2000), Yablo (1993), van Inwagen (1998a).
 - 42 Adams (2009: 8–11).
 - 43 Adams (2009: 11).
 - 44 It seems unlikely that World War I is necessary causally or otherwise for Adams’s existence. Adams’s ancestor might have moved to Philadelphia on grounds that didn’t involve World War I or the mustard gas. He might have come across a lovely print by Thomas Eakins (1844–1916) of early morning rowers on the Schuylkill River – one that moved him in such a way that he felt he had to live on its banks. Why didn’t God see to it that his ancestor came across that print?
 - 45 See Parfit’s (1984) answers, also odd, to the questions and kinds of cases Adams is here concerned with.
 - 46 Metz (2009: 40); Vice (2009).
 - 47 Kierkegaard (1968: 49–50).

RELIGION AND FLOURISHING

*Christopher Toner***Flourishing in philosophical and religious morality**

Ethics, religious or secular, seeks to answer the question, ‘How should one live?’ (by ‘secular ethics’ I mean here simply an approach to understanding the moral life that does not depend upon any revelation) – both seek to offer an account of how to live well, and thus of how to flourish. As is the case in secular ethics, we find in religious ethics many different accounts of flourishing (most prominently we find accounts focusing upon duty or upon virtue, especially upon love; we do also find consequentialist views, although I will not consider these here). In comparing philosophically informed versions of secular and religious ethics, we may find many shared concepts, and a good deal of normative agreement. We will also find many differences. The most important, the most basic, of these seems to me to be this: in secular ethics the answer to the question concerning how one should live will be grounded in consequences, or in human nature, or in rational imperatives, or in a social contract; in religious ethics, or at any rate in many versions of religious ethics, the answer will be grounded in a Person, or in the nature of the relationship between each human person and a Divine Person or Persons.

We read in Plato that ‘the good, then, is the end of all endeavour, the object on which every heart is set’ (Plato 1987: 505e). We hear an echo of this, but an echo with a foreign strain, when we read in Augustine, ‘Lord ... you made us for yourself and our hearts find no peace until they rest in you’ (Augustine 1961, I.1). And when we read, ‘You follow close behind the fugitive and recall us to yourself in ways we cannot understand’ (ibid. IV.4), we know we are in a different moral world. In a secular morality, you may pursue the Good, but need have no fear, or hope, that the Good will pursue you. You may write a book about the Good, but not one addressed to the Good, as Augustine’s *Confessions* is addressed to God. The Good has become God, an Idea a Person, and this changes everything.¹ The religious believer may turn to a secular master for help in many ways, but he must first of all respect what he hears from his divine master: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before me’, ‘If you would enter life, keep the commandments’, ‘You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect’.²

C.S. Lewis nicely captures the experience of one transitioning from a secular to a religious morality. At the time he started his career at Oxford, he was deeply under the influence of the idealism of Bradley and Bosanquet. Reaching a point at which he made a sincere effort to live

out the moral requirements of his philosophy, he found he needed to have ‘continual conscious recourse to what I called Spirit. But the fine, philosophical distinction between this and what ordinary people call “prayer to God” breaks down as soon as you start doing it in earnest. Idealism can be talked, and even felt; it cannot be lived’. And as he pursued this course,

As the dry bones shook and came together in that dreadful valley of Ezekiel’s, so now a philosophical theorem, cerebrally entertained, began to stir and heave and throw off its grave-clothes, and stood upright and became a living presence. I was to be allowed to play at philosophy no longer. ... But now what had been an ideal had become a command; and what might not be expected of one? ... Total surrender, an absolute leap in the dark, were demanded. ... In the Trinity Term of 1929 I gave in, and admitted that God was God, and knelt and prayed: perhaps, that night, the most dejected and reluctant convert in all England. I did not then see what is now the most shining and obvious thing; the Divine humility which will accept a convert even on such terms.³

Many, perhaps most, of the moral concepts and judgments Lewis had previously accepted would remain more or less intact in his new view of living well; yet for all that, the nature, purpose, even the feel of the moral life would be radically changed. He had encountered a Person who, he now believed, was the ground of all that is, and all that should be; of course this would affect his whole outlook on reality, and in particular on how he should live. And this sort of experience is common in religious conversions – how could it not be?

So while there may be much ground shared between religious and secular ethics, we must recognize that there will also be radical differences. In what follows, I will first seek to motivate four requirements (not to say the only four) that religion imposes upon conceptions of morality and flourishing. Next, I will briefly outline how deontological conceptions of flourishing can meet these requirements. Then I will turn to the eudaimonistic conception of flourishing as virtue or as the perfection of nature, taking Aquinas as a representative of this view. Here I will look at a number of weighty objections to the claim that this conception of flourishing can meet the four requirements, and show how an advocate of this conception could effectively respond. Finally, I will look at the bearing of some empirical studies upon the question of the relationship between religion and flourishing.

Three points before proceeding. First, while I will maintain that moralities of duty and virtue are both viable from a religious perspective, I will focus largely on the morality of virtue – I shall do so because the claim that it is compatible with a religious outlook is more controversial, for reasons I shall adduce. Second, it would be highly foolish to write about *the* religious outlook on flourishing; it would be impossible to write about *all* religious outlooks in a limited space. I will be concentrating on a range of Christian perspectives, and this for two reasons: One is that Christianity is the religion that has been most influential upon Western moral thinking; the other, it is the only religion I would dare to write about. I mean no disrespect to adherents to other faiths by this concentration – quite the reverse. I believe that much of what I say may accord with what adherents to other faiths would say, but leave that to others to judge. Third, it will become clear that the general religious perspective on morality I am taking here is of a traditional sort. I assume that we do not approach religious teachings with our moral views already complete, and reject the ‘hard sayings’ of the former in the light of the latter. Rather, if we are religious, and if our best understanding of religious teachings (and I do not mean by this simply the result of a uniformly literal reading of Scripture, nor do I mean to deny that secular learning can help shape that understanding) does yield up hard sayings, then these, however hard they may be, are to be accepted as regulative for our moral views – otherwise, we risk

having only ‘morality touched with emotion’, and not a religious morality. It is religious morality and its bearing on our conceptions of human flourishing with which I am concerned here, and thus I will speak of certain *requirements* that religion imposes upon those conceptions.⁴

Four requirements religion imposes on our conceptions of flourishing

How religious morality will differ from secular will depend, of course, upon how the divine Person is conceived and experienced. In Christian tradition, God is experienced in many ways, central among them as a loving Father, and also (in Christ) as a brother. But I am going to focus on certain other, seemingly more challenging, aspects of the experience of the divine – the experience of God as, e.g., the Holy One of Israel, as the Lord of Hosts.⁵ Such aspects form a large part of Rudolf Otto’s focus in his classic study of religious experience, *The Idea of the Holy*. There Otto describes how human experience of the divine gives rise to feelings of ‘the diminution of the self into nothingness’, and of one’s own ‘absolute “profaneness”’ (Otto 1917/1950: 50–51). Complementing such ‘creature-consciousness’ is the experience of ‘the holy’ as ‘that which commands our respect ... *‘Tu solus sanctus’* is rather a paean of *praise*, ... The object of such praise is not simply absolute might, ... but a might that has at the same time the supremest right to make the highest claim to service, and receives praise because it is in an absolute sense worthy to be praised. ... it is recognized as possessing in itself *objective* value that claims our homage’ (ibid. 51–52).

From this compact description of the experience of the holy, which Otto derives from the sacred writings of a range of religious traditions, we can differentiate four elements important to religious life: fear of (awe before) God, obedience to God, love of God above all else, and denial of self.⁶ To the extent that this description of religious experience is taken to be veridical with respect to human and divine nature (to the extent that the divine does possess ‘objective value that claims our homage’ and so forth), these four elements will be normative for religious life. And in Christian tradition it is taken to be veridical, on the basis of Scripture,⁷ the testimony of saints and mystics, and philosophical argument. Thus we can understand these elements to impose requirements upon, at least, any Christian morality – Christian morality must accord central roles to fear and love of God, obedience to God, and denial of self. Of course, these are not put forward as the only requirements religion imposes upon flourishing – also prominent (and more clearly related to other aspects of God’s personality, if I may so put it, such as God as Father) are requirements to love one’s neighbour as oneself, to love one’s enemies, to pursue holiness, to practise certain virtues, and so forth. But these are the four on which I focus, due to their so clearly distinguishing religious from secular morality, and their seeming so problematic for any eudaimonistic view of flourishing.

Now, while any Christian moralist must meet these four requirements, my assumption will be that she is allowed substantial freedom regarding how she meets them (what is the exact nature of the fear of God, what order is there among the requirements, etc.). Depending upon her religious tradition, there may be exegetical or traditional grounds for reducing this freedom (for holding, e.g., that subordinating love to obedience, as Ockham seems to do, is mistaken); but this issue is one I shall not take up here. So Christian morality, as Christian, must meet these requirements; as morality, it must give an account of living well – of flourishing. Our next questions are, how do the requirements shape the accounts of flourishing? And, is holding a eudaimonistic ethic of flourishing as perfection of nature consistent with meeting them?

Flourishing as obedience

A deontological approach to flourishing (living well by reliably and whole-heartedly performing one’s duty) may seem well placed to address these requirements. But some deontological theories

will not serve. A neo-Hobbesian social contract theory, according to which morality is invented in order to serve the interests of each party to the contract, will not do, for the obvious reason that there is no role for God in such a theory. The same goes, for the same reason, for many neo-Kantian deontological theories. Even if we look at instances of these theories that do reserve some significant role for God – e.g., those of Hobbes and Kant themselves – there is the problem that both allot (in very different ways, of course) too central a role to the self. In Hobbes, although we find claims related to the requirements of fear of and obedience to God, it is self, not God, that is loved above all else (and there is little place for self-denial). And even though Kant says that moral precepts can be understood as divine commands (see Kant 1998: 99), they should not be obeyed *because* they are divine commands, or because of Who God is; they must, if following them is to be of moral worth, be self-legislated. The centrality of autonomy to Kant's moral theory renders it incompatible with the four requirements – to obey God because His commands ratify what we already legislate for ourselves is not really to obey God.

Deontologically inclined religious moralists have instead usually looked to one or another version of divine command theory. Such theories of course place a premium upon obedience to God, but typically obedience is actually not the foundational element – it is usually recognized that some explanation of why we should obey God is needed.

One possibility is to base obedience to God upon the fear of God – perhaps in a crude way (God will send us to Hell if we don't obey ...), or perhaps in what seems to me the more interesting and plausible way of construing fear of God as awe before the divine majesty and recognition of our utter dependence upon God as the creator and sustainer of all that is. Either way, such an approach could then go on to meet the requirement to love God by appealing to divinely revealed commands to do just that. The requirement to deny self is also easily met: God could command us to act in ways that are contrary to the perfection of human nature, and in ways that frustrate our deepest desires – the command to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, on one plausible reading, is a good example of both. What does flourishing now look like? Living well must be understood as the fulfilment of one's duties, and as including all and only such attainment of natural goods, and natural goodness, as God should choose to command. This sort of divine command theory could find support in certain elements of Otto's analysis of religious experience, in numerous Scripture passages (including, e.g., parts of the Book of Job), and in a plausible (although contestable) reading of William of Ockham's moral theory. It is no doubt open to a number of objections, but it certainly exemplifies one way a religious morality could give an account of living well that meets the four requirements upon which we are focusing.

There is, however, a quite different sort of divine command theory, one that grounds the requirement to obey God upon the love of God, which love is called for because God is Goodness itself. On this view, living well consists essentially in loving God for His own sake, and therefore obeying Him. Fear of God will now chiefly take the form of what the medieval tradition called 'filial fear', the fear of offending and distancing oneself from a good and beloved Father.⁸ And all of us, like Abraham, must deny ourselves at least in the sense of being ready to set aside our heart's desires and to forego flourishing (in the sense of perfection of our nature) should God so will it. This (to my mind much more attractive) sort of divine command theory can meet the four requirements, and can also find support in Otto's analysis of religious experience and in Scripture. Its basic idea, that of founding obedience upon love, has been developed in a number of sophisticated and powerful ways. Perhaps its classic statement is that of the Blessed John Duns Scotus, a statement that has recently been adopted and developed by John Hare; Robert Adams's 'modified divine command theory' offers another, and quite different, variation on the basic idea (see Scotus 1997, Hare 2000, and Adams 1999). These versions of divine command theory are much less susceptible to criticism than are those that

ground obedience upon fear; in particular, they offer plausible ways of answering the worry that divine command theory makes God out to be an arbitrary tyrant. An advocate of this sort of divine command theory may well also be in a position to say that the most central aspect of the perfection of our nature – the perfection of our will, in loving goodness for goodness’s sake, loving God for God’s sake – is indeed of the essence of a flourishing compatible with the four requirements of religious morality. The rest of it, well, it must be laid at God’s feet, to be taken up again only at His command.

Flourishing as perfection of nature

The phrase ‘flourishing as perfection of nature’ should put us in mind of the eudaimonistic virtue ethics of Aristotle and his many followers, one of the most prominent of whom is St. Thomas Aquinas. It may seem odd to ask whether Aquinas’s moral teaching is Christian, but despite his standing as doctor of the Church and his vast influence upon Christian (chiefly, but by no means only, upon Catholic) moral thinking, it is a fair question. There are strong *prima facie* grounds for thinking that a broadly Scotistic approach is the best a Christian moralist who seeks to honour the four requirements catalogued above can do with respect to the perfection of our nature. First, it may seem clear that the love of God, or at least the love of God above all else and for His own sake, is incompatible with eudaimonism. Second, it may seem even clearer that fear of and unconditional obedience to God, together with denial of self, must be seen by a eudaimonist as an instance of what Christine Swanton calls ‘hyperobjective vice’. Finally, and most clearly of all, it may seem, denial of self is incompatible with perfection of one’s nature as a goal.

Doubtless, many versions of eudaimonism would not serve the religious moralist well. Some are self-centred or even egoistic, and will not be able to respect the requirement to love God above all else. The most influential version ever formulated, that of Aristotle himself, is not, I think, susceptible to that particular charge, but it nevertheless is to be conceded that Christian eudaimonism will, in important respects, not be Aristotelian. While the Christian may, with Aristotle, conceive the perfection of our nature as some sort of union between man and God, both God and man, and thus also their union, are understood quite differently. God is active, creating and sustaining, commanding and bestowing grace, and is always ‘pursuing the fugitive’; man is made in the divine image but fallen (both great and wretched, as Pascal has it), sunk below his created station, yet offered redemption and called to a union with God beyond his natural capacities. Of all this, Scotus and Ockham are well aware, but of course Aquinas is too. We can perhaps best see how flourishing as perfection of nature is consistent with meeting the four requirements, by looking at how Aquinas’s eudaimonistic ethic does meet them. This I will facilitate by responding to the three worries raised above, in turn.

The first is easily enough disposed of. Aquinas holds that rational creatures naturally love God, the universal good, more than they love themselves (‘from natural love angel and man alike love God before themselves and with a greater love. Otherwise, if either of them loved self more than God, it would follow that natural love would be perverse, and that it would not be perfected but destroyed by charity’⁹). Now, it is true that human beings sometimes sacrifice themselves for others they love, or for a cause they hold to be just, or indeed, in the case of martyrs, for God. But such acts are comparatively rare, and the claim that loving God (or any good understood to be greater than ourselves) more than we love ourselves is *natural* (rather than a, perhaps meritorious, violent act of self-sacrifice) may seem excessively optimistic. I think Aquinas would agree, so long as we are speaking of human nature as we find it. But that nature, he thinks, is fallen. As such, it bears what tradition regards as the ‘four wounds of nature’: ignorance, malice,

weakness, and concupiscence (Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 85, art. 3). These wounds, a removal of the proper ordering of our faculties resulting in tendencies toward ignorance of what is truly good, and toward willing what we know to be evil, explain why it is difficult (seemingly against our nature) to love the good (and ultimately God) for its own sake. Given the doctrine of Original Sin, we can see how one can consistently hold that the love of God above all else perfects our nature, even while it may involve (psychological) violence toward oneself. (As this may suggest, the fallenness of our nature will be important also in speaking to the requirement to deny oneself.)

What of the worry that fear of and unconditional obedience to God, together with denial of self, must be seen as an instance of what Christine Swanton calls 'hyperobjective vice'? Swanton describes this as a vice that

involves adopting a totally wrong (distorted) perspective. It is a state which is not a properly *human* objective standpoint. Specifically, it is not true on my view that the *more* detached one is from one's personal position in the world, one's human character, and so on, the *more* (virtuously) *objective* one is.

(Swanton 2003, 183)

One form this vice takes is self-effacement, in which state one 'overplays the demands of the world', and 'abases oneself before a "Master", by comparison to whom one is contemptible', or even a 'miserable sinner' (Swanton 2003: 187–88, and see 188n21, where she refers to St. Teresa of Avila's *Life*). I should note that Swanton's criticisms target neither religious objectivity alone, as she also mentions Colin McGinn's notion of a 'cosmic perspective' from which human concerns seem not to matter much (ibid. 181), nor religious objectivity as such (but only a 'certain perspective of God'). But Swanton's point must be reckoned with, since this perspective of God (as a Master before Whom one is to abase oneself etc.) is precisely the one we are concerned with here. At any rate, the God Whom we must fear and absolutely obey, and for Whose sake we must deny ourselves, sounds like a Master before Whom one is to abase oneself. If the four requirements call for self-effacement, and if this self-effacement is a vice, then honouring the four requirements would seem to be vicious and thus incompatible with flourishing as the perfection of nature.

While I want to set aside the negatively connoted term 'abasement', I think a kind of self-effacement is required in a religious morality. Recall Otto's point about 'creature-consciousness' (and he cites in this context Abraham's appeal to the Lord, which begins with describing himself as being 'but dust and ashes' (Genesis 18:27), and Peter's 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord' (Luke 5:8)). But this is not *hyperobjectivity*: It does not involve detachment 'from one's personal position in the world, one's human character'; rather, it starts from precisely there, but now assesses that position in relation to the God Who has revealed Himself to the person. If an aspiring young power hitter were to meet, say, Henry Aaron, a certain degree of self-effacement – humility and respect, even a sort of awe, together with a great openness to counsel – would be entirely appropriate. It would reflect an objective appraisal of the situation. And with all respect to Aaron, in a meeting of creature and Creator, a much more radical form of self-effacement – a sense of unworthiness, fear, and obedience – would be called for, and called for by, again, an objective appraisal of the situation.

Now as Swanton says, proper objectivity is best seen as an aspect of practical wisdom, and practical wisdom best seen as operating in and through the virtues of character (Swanton 2003: 179). It is thus instructive to note that Aquinas's eudaimonism recognizes *as virtues* traits tending toward self-effacement before God: First, he recognizes the (non-Aristotelian) virtue of humility, which denotes 'in the first place man's subjection to God' (Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 161,

art. 2, AD 3); Aquinas goes on to note with approval Augustine's linking of humility to poverty of spirit and the gift of fear, understood as reverence for God). The humble man, he says (ibid. qu. 161, art. 1, AD 1), is 'inclined to the lowest place' – here he too cites Abraham's recognition that before the Lord he is 'but dust and ashes' (worth noting, though, is his point that inclination to the lowest place can be vicious, if for example a man 'compares himself to senseless beasts' (here he is citing the forty-eighth Psalm); creature-consciousness, for Aquinas, must remain objective about what sort of creature one is, namely a rational one made in the divine image). Second, Aquinas recognizes obedience as a virtue subordinate to justice – justice is the virtue whereby one renders to each his due; obedience is the aspect of justice whereby one renders what is due to one's superior. And, 'all wills, by a kind of necessity of justice, are bound to obey the divine command' (ibid. qu. 104, art. 4). Obedience can be recognized as a virtue, as an aspect of the perfection of human nature, when we keep in view that humans are essentially in relation to others (we are social animals). Part of being good is being good as a citizen under political rulers, a son or daughter under parents, a creature under the Creator. All of these relationships call for some degree of self-effacement; the last, if God and man are anything like what Aquinas thought, for a great degree (although again, not so great a degree that one equate oneself to 'senseless beasts'). Humility, reverent fear, and obedience can indeed express 'objectivity in virtue', and thus can be seen as contributing to flourishing as the perfection of nature.

What of the requirement to deny oneself? Right after first predicting His Passion, Jesus says that one wishing to be His disciple must 'deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it' (Matthew 16:24–25). A Christian account of flourishing, of living well, is, clearly, accountable to Christ's own teaching on how to live. The question here, of course, is how one pursuing flourishing as the perfection of nature could claim to be at the same time following the requirement to deny oneself.

I want to approach this question by first investigating the relationship between living virtuously (pursuing perfection) and self-restraint (one form of denying oneself). Augustine, famously, portrays the life of virtue as a constant struggle: temperance must battle temptation, courage fear, and so forth (see Augustine 1998, XIX.4). Now although Aquinas adopts Augustine's definition of virtue (see Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 55, art. 4), he also adapts it, and arguably his understanding of virtue is more Aristotelian than Augustinian. But of course Aristotelian virtue is 'second nature', and if one is virtuous, one acts well not only reliably, but also with ease and pleasure. 'Virtue' as a struggle seems really to be just continence, a step on the way to virtue, but not virtue itself (indeed 'self-restraint' is not a bad translation of Aristotle's *enkrateia*, or Aquinas's *continentia*). The image of the flourishing agent that seems to come into focus is one of a person living a fully integrated life, acting well and enjoying it, brimming with psychological health and well-being, a poster-child for happiness studies textbooks. But, where is the self-denial? What cross is there for this person to bear?

But this image needs adjustment, even for Aristotle. For one thing, he allows that acting well can be a struggle even for the virtuous. The brave person, e.g., does feel fear, and although he will endure death or injury when it is noble to do so, he will always find it painful, and find the loss of his good life most regrettable (Aristotle 1999, III.7, 9). So there must be some degree of self-restraint even in the virtuous. Furthermore, Aristotle recognizes that rational argument will not move people of less than virtuous character to act well; law, which 'has the power that compels', is needed (ibid. X.9). Now if we recognize that the virtues can be possessed in varying degrees, then there will be those who are virtuous, and thus no longer need pervasive external legal compulsion to motivate acting well, but who nonetheless must compel themselves – must restrain unruly fears or desires that still come to the fore in very difficult situations.

This possibility is an implication of the recent trend in virtue ethics that sees ‘virtue’ as a ‘threshold’ or ‘satis’ concept, such that there is an ideal of perfect virtue that is rarely if ever attained, and actual agents are accounted virtuous if they approximate closely enough to the ideal (see Swanton 2003; Russell 2009). For, if one is virtuous by approximating to an ideal one falls short of, one must still be subject to some temptations to stray, and thus one must exercise some self-restraint. I think Aristotle recognizes degrees of virtue, and thus something along the lines of this recent trend. However that may be, a Christian eudaimonist can recognize this, and Aquinas certainly does, holding that a virtuous agent may be better inclined to the act of one virtue than to that of another; and that of two virtuous agents one may be more inclined to the act of some virtue than is the other (see Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 66, art. 2, response and AD 2). This means that at least some virtuous agents will be less than perfectly inclined to the acts of at least some virtues, and this means that at least some self-restraint, some level of self-denial, can be part of the life of virtue.

In fact, Aquinas gives us grounds to think that some self-restraint is needed in the fields of all the virtues, and in the lives of all virtuous agents during earthly life. Commenting on St. Paul’s saying that ‘I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind’ (Rom. 7: 23), he maintains that as a result of Original Sin and the resulting deprivation of Original Justice, we are subject to the *lex fomitis peccati*, the ‘law’ of the tinder of sin. This deprives us of our proper dignity (Aquinas 1981, Ia-IIae, qu. 91, art. 6), and results in the four wounds of nature (ignorance, malice, weakness, and concupiscence) discussed above, wounds that weaken the subject of each of the cardinal virtues, and that are never fully healed in this life.

So, conceiving flourishing as the perfection of nature, a perfection to be attained by the acquisition and exercise of virtue, is consistent with a recognition that self-restraint, and thus some degree of denial of self, is endemic to earthly life (of course, a recognition of an inescapable need for self-restraint is not consistent with the idea that we attain perfection in this life, but Aquinas has already argued on other grounds that we cannot attain perfection in this life (see *ibid.* Ia-IIae, qu. 5, art. 3), and in any event no Christian need be put off by this). We can now turn to the question of whether a theory that conceives living well in terms of perfection of nature can do full justice to the requirement of self-denial.

This question is confronted directly by Jacques Maritain in his juxtaposition of the doctrine of St. Thomas with that of St. John of the Cross, who spoke of ‘nothing, nothing, nothing, even to leave one’s skin and all else for Christ’ (cited at Maritain 1932/1995: 352). As Maritain comments, ‘the best thing the creature can do is to cast himself off, rid himself of self, renounce his own proper operations and make a void within himself’, a void to be filled by God (*ibid.*). This is as strong a statement of the doctrine of self-denial as one could care to have. But as Maritain points out, St. John as a mystic is not speaking of the ontological order, but of the psychological: ‘His point of view is not that of the structure of our substance and its faculties: it is the point of view of our ownership of ourselves in the free use and moral exercise of our activity’ (*ibid.* 353). St. John, he says, knows well that grace perfects nature; the nothingness, the death, he calls for is not the destruction or denial of our created nature, but the death of self-surrender – the very thing called for by such virtues as humility and obedience. The surrender itself is virtuous, perfective of our nature as creatures; psychologically, it is experienced as death, as void rather than just as openness, as denial rather than fulfilment of the self, primarily due to our sinfulness. Commenting on St. John’s notion of the ‘night of the spirit’, Maritain writes,

To remove the human rust at the centre of the soul, must it not be made red-hot in the fire like an empty cauldron, and be in some manner destroyed and annihilated ...

In this way do the passive purifications of the spirit remove the deep inveterate stains,
as old as Adam, which are woven into our very selves ...

(Maritain 1932/1995: 386)

It is our wounded nature, our sinfulness and especially Original Sin, that explains why the pursuit of the perfection of our nature can seem so ‘unnatural’, can, psychologically, involve violence toward our own nature, radical denial of the self. Yet what psychologically seems like the total surrendering of the self is at the same time virtuous activity; it is ‘to be in supreme act of attentive and loving immobility’ (ibid. 348); it is to direct one’s loving attention toward God. And let us note that this path of self-surrender is not all suffering and death; after all, although ‘whoever would save his life will lose it ... whoever loses his life for my sake will find it’ (Mt. 16:25). The self-denying attention to God is often rewarded with the experience of love and joy (Maritain cites St. John’s sensory imagery of ‘wondrous fragrance and sweetness’; Maritain 1932/1995: 365–66).

Now, the point of the foregoing is not that a religious eudaimonist must be in all respects a faithful Thomist (such as Maritain was); the point is more to offer a ‘the actual proves the possible’ sort of defence of the idea that eudaimonism (understood as counselling the pursuit of flourishing as the perfection of human nature) can meet the four requirements that religion imposes upon moral theory. Of course I have not here defended the idea exhaustively, but it does at least seem that some of the strongest objections to the idea can be answered. In closing this section, it is worth noting that some of the moves made above may be of use to the religious deontologist as well. It is sometimes alleged, for example, that divine command theory is demeaning to human agents. But, if obedience to God is virtuous and thus consistent with the pursuit of human perfection, it is hard to see how it would really be demeaning. It can seem demeaning only to those infected with pride (i.e., to all of us).

Religion, flourishing, and some empirical studies

In this section, I want to ask first about the relationship between religion and two things connected with flourishing (welfare and moral conduct), and about the bearing of some empirical findings upon how we should understand this relationship; and second about the implications of evolutionary theory for the plausibility of the Christian eudaimonist’s dependence upon the doctrine of Original Sin. I am concerned with possible *modus tollens* arguments against religious conceptions of flourishing that meet the four requirements. The arguments’ form would of course be: if X, then Y; ~Y; therefore, ~X. Here, X serves as a placeholder for such claims as ‘Religious moral practice is compatible with flourishing in eudaimonistic fashion’, or ‘Religious conceptions (or eudaimonistic religious conceptions) of morality and flourishing are tenable’; and Y stands for such claims as ‘The successful practitioner of religious morality will be psychologically happy (since flourishing implies psychological happiness)’, ‘Religious devotion will promote the moral goodness of devotees’, and ‘We can accept the doctrine of Original Sin’. In the first case, I will deny the truth of the conditional; in the second, I will point out how hard it would be to prove (or disprove) the truth of the denial of the consequent of the conditional; in the third, I will show that the argument commits a fallacy of equivocation.

First, there is the matter of the relationship between religion and welfare or psychological happiness, which is usually understood to be connected in some close way with flourishing (eudaimonism would typically see welfare as an aspect, or a natural concomitant, of flourishing). There is a commonly held view that religious devotion tends to make people guilt-ridden, judgmental of self and others, and generally unhappy. No doubt it can do these things, although

in point of fact religious devotion seems to be positively correlated with a sense of well-being (see e.g. Kenny and Kenny 2006). But how important is this correlation? It seems to me that almost the right attitude is struck by Lord Brideshead in his conversation with Charles Ryder as they clean out Sebastian's rooms after he's been withdrawn by his family from Oxford (due in large part to his drunkenness):

'I believe God prefers drunkards to a lot of respectable people.'

'For God's sake', I [Charles] said, for I was near to tears that morning, 'why bring God into everything? ... It seems to me that without your religion Sebastian would have the chance to be a happy and healthy man'.

'It's arguable', said Brideshead. 'Do you think he will need this elephant's foot again?'

(*Waugh 1945: 145*)

I say 'almost the right attitude' because, as readers of Waugh know, Brideshead never strikes quite the right attitude toward anything. But, set his social ineptitude aside and note the point: he is unconcerned by the possibility that religious devotion may lead to psychological unhappiness; living well, from a religious perspective (here a very traditional Catholic one), does not centrally concern itself with one's social respectability or with how good one feels about one's life; devotion to God and neighbour are central (to be sure, Sebastian was not presently doing well on this head either); the rest is so much fluff. Something like Brideshead's attitude properly follows from the acceptance of the requirement of self-denial, and it is clearly consistent with a deontological religious conception of flourishing (or indeed with, say, a Kantian one). Things are not quite so straightforward with a eudaimonist conception – given the connection between being virtuous and enjoying virtuous activity, we would expect a life of flourishing to be also a life of psychological happiness. So here is the *modus tollens* argument: If religious moral practice is compatible with flourishing in eudaimonistic fashion, then the successful practitioner of religious morality will be psychologically happy (since flourishing implies psychological happiness); but it is not the case that the successful practitioner of religious morality will be psychologically happy (there is no reliable link between such practice and such happiness); therefore, etc.

But here, the conditional is false – it is false not just for religious eudaimonism, but for eudaimonism generally. A eudaimonist can grant that in this life circumstances may be such as to separate the virtuous life from the enjoyment that naturally attends it; it may even be, in some cultural settings, that such separation is common – if so, that is simply a cross to be borne. Thus Philippa Foot, in her discussion of the 'Letter Writers' (German dissidents facing execution under Hitler's regime), notes that in such circumstances what she calls 'deep happiness' is no longer a possibility even for the virtuous (see Foot 2001: 94–96); see also the discussion of Priam and the bearing of fortune on happiness in Aristotle 1999, I.9–10). And the Christian eudaimonist seems even better placed to account for the possible separation of virtue from enjoyment of life, for all the reasons considered above in the discussion of Maritain's attempted reconciliation of St. Thomas and St. John of the Cross. The positive correlation between religious devotion and reported psychological happiness is a nice result for the religious moralist, but the plausibility of her moral theory is not dependent upon it, even if she is a eudaimonist.

The second point concerns the relationship between religious devotion and moral conduct. If Ryder had charged that 'without your religion Sebastian would have the chance to be a *good* man', an unruffled 'It's arguable' would have been completely off the mark; the religious moralist holds that religion teaches us how to live well, how to flourish, and being a good person is of the essence of flourishing on both deontological and eudaimonist conceptions of religious morality (although of course the good person is differently conceived). In his *Breaking*

the Spell, Daniel Dennett maintains that religion does not do well in this task. Dennett has at the head of the chapter on religion and morality this well-known line from Steven Weinberg: ‘Good people will do good things, and bad people will do bad things; but for good people to do bad things – that takes religion’ (Dennett 2006: 279). Of course, no one thinks this is literally true – lots of things can lead good people to do bad things (a secular political ideology, for instance). But surely it contains a grain of truth – religious devotion *can* lead an otherwise good person into fanaticism, intolerance, or violence. Yet as Freeman Dyson notes in his review of Dennett’s book, there is a corollary: ‘And for bad people to do good things – that [also] takes religion’ (Dyson 2006). And while Dennett in effect admits this point in a generous moment (see Dennett 2006: 54–55), he insists that there is no evidence to support the claim that there is any significant positive correlation between religious affiliation and moral conduct in the American population as a whole (ibid. 279–80). So here is the argument: If religious conceptions of morality and flourishing are tenable, then religious devotion will promote the moral goodness of devotees; religious devotion fails to promote the moral goodness of devotees; therefore, etc. Now, as Dennett points out, work is ongoing in this field, and since the publication of his book, Arthur Brooks has made the case that there is a very significant positive correlation between religious devotion and moral conduct in at least one field, that of charitable giving (see Brooks 2007).

I am in no position to summarize the trends in empirical findings or rule on their import; here I want to make just two closely related points. First, to grasp their import (to grasp whether they support the conditional’s consequent or its denial), one would need to look at the studies and their methods very carefully.¹⁰ For example, do they control for typical differences in the socio-economic status of, say, atheists and evangelicals? How do they determine who is ‘religious’ – is anyone who self-identifies as believing in God thereby religious? Must she attend weekly religious services, or self-identify as devout? What might be worrisome to the religious moralist would be a negative or insignificant correlation between devout religiosity and moral conduct, although even in such a case there would be many issues needing to be settled, one of which brings us to the second point:¹¹ the interpretation of results typically, and probably unavoidably, will involve making some substantive and controversial moral judgments. For example, suppose that devout Catholics use contraception less frequently than non-religious people – is that a positive correlation between religious devotion and moral conduct or not? Again, when Dennett puts ‘contemplative monks’ on a par with ‘people who devote their lives to improving their stamp collections’ and says that ‘the best that can be said of them is that they manage to stay out of trouble’ (Dennett 2006: 306), he is clearly supposing that moral conduct must benefit society in a material way; that is moral conduct on his view. But on the monks’ view, contemplative prayer is an exemplary form of moral conduct. If God exists and is as Christian tradition says, surely the monks are right (and if He does not, the religious moralist will have much larger worries than statistical correlations). Which view should figure in interpreting results?

So, while the religious moralist may smile at Brooks’s findings and cringe at Dennett’s report that Christians fill our jails at a rate proportionate to their representation in the general population (Dennett 2006: 279), it seems clear that empirical studies all by themselves are not going to answer the question, Does religion contribute to living well? Too many philosophically and theologically contestable issues hang about the question to turn it over entirely to the social scientists.

Finally, in arguing that flourishing as the perfection of human nature could meet the four requirements, I had to draw fairly heavily upon the notion of Original Sin. But it might be thought that science, and in particular evolutionary theory, has done away with at least that

doctrine. I do not think that is actually the case at all. There have been a number of interesting attempts to show the compatibility of evolution and various understandings of Original Sin, even wholly traditional ones (see e.g. Kemp 2011 and Mullen 2007). But suppose for the sake of argument that no such attempt succeeds, and that the progress of science really has rendered untenable belief in any historical Fall resulting from a first sin. In this case the *modus tollens* argument would run as follows: If a eudaimonist religious conception of morality and flourishing is tenable, then we must be able to accept the doctrine of Original Sin; it is not the case that we can accept this doctrine; therefore, etc.

But this argument does not succeed in derailing the religious moralist who relies on Original Sin to show how her notion of flourishing meets the four requirements, for it depends upon an equivocal use of the term, 'the doctrine of Original Sin'. G.K. Chesterton once wrote that Original Sin is 'the only part of Christian theology which can really be proved' (Chesterton 1986: 217). Like many other of his striking turns of phrase, this one is hyperbolic, but has a sense in which it is clearly true. He does not mean that we can prove that Adam and Eve committed a first sin (what theologians call the *peccatum originale originans*); he means that it can be proven, or even just easily seen by looking around, that we are fallen, sinful by nature, as if bearing the stain of Original Sin (*peccatum originale originatum*) (see Kemp 2011 for further discussion of these two senses of 'Original Sin'). This innate tendency to wrong-doing and vice (whether one wishes to call it sinfulness or not), and not a calamitous historical first sin, is all that the religious moralist is relying on here. And surely she is entitled to rely on it. Again, look around, listen to the news, study the statistics on crime or lying or adultery, or stay closer to home (I see ample proof of human sinfulness in myself). What is more, the evolutionary theory that is the source of the objection to Original Sin as *peccatum originale originans* may itself come to the rescue of Original Sin as *peccatum originale originatum* – for example, evolutionary psychology lends support to the idea that the seven deadly vices of Christian tradition are, due to our evolutionary heritage, quite 'natural' to us (see Chapman 2004).¹² So, the conditional claim of the *modus tollens* argument is true only with respect to a weakened doctrine (embracing Original Sin only in the sense of *peccatum originale originatum*), while the denial of the consequent is true (on the grant I made for the sake of argument) only for the full-blooded traditional doctrine (which embraces both senses) – which is to say that the argument fails.

Conclusion

At the outset, I pointed out that the most important difference between a secular and a religious morality was that the latter, unlike the former, finds its ground in the relation between each human person and a Divine Person or Persons, and argued that such a ground leads to the recognition of four requirements any religious, and particularly any Christian, morality must meet: fear of God, obedience to God, love of God, and denial of self. I then showed how religious moralities of both deontological and eudaimonistic forms could meet these requirements, and how such commitments affect the shape of such moralities and their account of flourishing or living well – the former gravitate toward one or another sort of divine command theory; the latter toward a recognition that our (social) human nature finds its ultimate perfection only in a virtuous relationship with God. I also tried to indicate how advocates of one or another religious morality could respond to certain objections (e.g., the objection that fear and obedience exemplify 'hyperobjective vice', and objections based upon empirical studies). As a result, I hope it can be seen that various religious understandings of flourishing are coherent, plausible given their basic assumptions, and consistent with human dignity. Whether religious moralists should tend toward deontology or eudaimonism is an intramural debate, turning on further debates

about God's nature and the nature of His freedom, which I have not tried to resolve here. Whether moralists should actually be religious, of course, is a further issue into which I have not delved deeply. It seems to me, though, not an issue to be resolved on moral grounds – there are no compelling moral objections to obedience to and fear of (awe before) God, and so forth. If God, God anything like the one conceived by religious tradition, exists, then religious moralists is just what we should be.¹³

Notes

- 1 It is worth noting that the part of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that deals most extensively with morality is not called 'On Human Flourishing' or 'The Moral Life'; it is called 'Life in Christ', and contains such statements as this: 'The moral law is the work of divine Wisdom. Its biblical meaning can be defined as fatherly instruction, God's pedagogy' (#1950).
- 2 Quotations from Exodus 20:2–3, Matthew 19:17, and Matthew 5:48, respectively. All Scriptural quotations are taken from the *Revised Standard Version*.
- 3 Lewis (1956: 226–29). Lewis, like Augustine, experienced his conversion partly in terms of being a fugitive pursued to the ground.
- 4 It is a commonplace of Christian tradition (although it is not universally held) that natural reason unaided by revelation can know many truths, including moral truths (thus the respect, even deference, paid by the Christian theologians of the high middle ages to the philosophers of ancient Greece and of the Jewish and Islamic traditions). This might seem to present a problem for the claim above that revealed truths are regulative with respect to morality – what if revelation conflicts with a moral truth known by reason? It is, however, another commonplace of the tradition that this cannot actually happen. What can and does happen is that what seems to be a deliverance of reason conflicts with what seems to be a deliverance of revelation. In some such cases, resolution is reached; in others, conflict drags on; but in all, patience, study, charity, and (from the religious moralist) prayer for guidance are needed.
- 5 And this sort of experience is not lacking in the New Testament; see e.g., Matthew 17:1–9.
- 6 I cannot here do justice to Otto's rich analysis of religious experience, but want to note that what I am calling 'fear of God' is not best understood as anything like 'fear of a tiger'; Otto prefers terms such as 'dread' and 'awe' (see Otto 1917/1950, chapter IV). And relevant to 'love of God' is his discussion of how Christ revealed that 'the Holy One of Israel' is also 'our Father' (ibid. 83–84).
- 7 For relevant Scriptural passages, see for example: Fear of God: 'The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight' (Prov. 9:10). Obedience to God: 'If you would enter life, keep the commandments' (Matthew 9:17). Love of God: 'you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might' (Deuteronomy 6:5; cf. Matthew 22:36–40). Denial of Self: 'If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me' (Matthew 16:24). These brief references, without context and comment, are not put forward as 'proof texts'; I believe the authority of the four requirements within (at least) Christianity is widely enough recognized that a reminder of them, rather than a proof, suffices.
- 8 For an interesting recent discussion of filial fear, see DeYoung (2012) (which focuses upon Aquinas's take on such fear).
- 9 Aquinas (1981, Ia, qu. 60, art. 5). That grace perfects rather than destroys nature is a Thomistic axiom laid down, e.g., at Ia, qu. 1, art. 8, AD 2.
- 10 Readers interested in this subject might begin by consulting Paul (2005) (a study supportive of Dennett's contentions), Moreno-Riaño *et al.* (2006) (a methodological critique of Paul's study), and Haidt (2012), Chapter 11 (which contains arguments for a fairly general positive correlation between religious practice and moral conduct).
- 11 Another issue concerns Robert Adams's point that 'the Holy has rough edges' (here he is building on Otto 1950), and that the behaviour of saints may often seem 'bizarre' or 'unnatural' (Adams 1999: 52–53). Ratcheting down from saints to just plain good people, it does not seem implausible to suggest that there may be many good religious people with rough edges, where the rough edges tend to show up in statistical surveys while the core goodness does not (the 'hooker with the heart of gold', like Sonia Marmeladov in *Crime and Punishment*, for example). Still another issue arises from the fact that Christianity is 'a religion for sinners' (see Dyson 2006) in the sense that devotion to it is especially attractive

to the desperate seeking help, the guilt-ridden seeking reform. If that is so, it could be the case that Christians perform no better than nonbelievers according to the measures of a study, while still being the case that their religious devotion has often led to dramatic moral improvements. Of course, it could turn out that a closer look would make things even worse for the religious moralist. My present point is just that such a closer look is necessary, whatever it would reveal.

- 12 Here is a worry though: Suppose that it is granted that our nature is to some degree ‘fallen’ (in the sense that most or all of us are to some degree inclined to vice) but not granted that there was an actual, historical Fall. In that case, how could it be held that the striving to overcome such ‘natural viciousness’ via self-denial and so forth is a striving to perfect our nature, rather than to overcome it? Here I can only hint at a response: As Michael Thompson has argued, the nature of a living thing is not determined by how most things of that kind are; it is determined by how that form of life survives, propagates, and generally does its thing – ‘although “the mayfly” breeds shortly before dying [that is its nature], *most* mayflies die long before breeding’ (Thompson 2008: 68); thus it may also be that although ‘the human’ is virtuous [that is its nature], most (even all) humans have tendencies that conflict with virtue, and any human can attain virtue (and thus perfect her nature) only through struggle and self-denial.
- 13 I wish to thank my colleague, Mathew Lu, for valuable comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

Part VII

Religion and scientific scrutiny

RELIGION AND REASON

Robert C. Koons

Two questions immediately demand our attention: *What is the nature of reason? What is the nature of religion?* Answering the first question takes up Section 1 below (the nature of reason), and in Section 2 I deal with the nature of religious faith. In Section 3, I consider four competing models of the relation between reason and faith: faith as involving an application of reason to belief; faith as an enhanced form of rational belief; faith as at least partly independent of rational belief; and faith as wholly irrational belief. These all concern the question of how, if at all, religious faith is grounded in reason. In Section 4, I examine the question of whether reason might be in some sense be grounded in faith.

1. What is reason?

Traditionally, the term ‘reason’ (*ratio* in Latin) has been used to refer to the capacity to draw inferences correctly and reliably. This narrow sense obviously applies not only to inferred beliefs but also to actions, where actions are thought of as products of practical reasoning (see 1.1, below). Rational belief ‘aims’ at the truth, while rational action aims at the good (or the good as apprehended by the agent). However, ‘reason’ has also been used more broadly, to refer not only to our capacity for reasoning but also to the sum total of all of our capacities to form beliefs and to act sensibly. Let’s focus initially on reason as a natural faculty or capacity for reliably getting to true beliefs.

Alvin Plantinga (1993a: 195) has argued that mere reliability cannot be the standard of reason. It is easy to imagine someone who, by some fluke, acquires a capacity to form beliefs that are both reliably true and yet unreasonably believed. Suppose, for example, that a brain lesion gives me the capacity to form reliable beliefs about which numbers are prime. Until I can verify that the new capacity is in fact reliable, it would be unreasonable for me to place complete confidence in these hunches, however reliable they may in fact be. To be *prima facie* reasonable, beliefs must be formed and sustained by the proper functioning of our cognitive capacities.

A large part of this proper functioning of the mind seems to involve following appropriate rules or norms. There are at least three ways of thinking about the normativity of reason:

1. As analogous to the deontic principles of morality.
2. As analogous to the moral virtues.
3. As the proper functioning of a teleologically ordered system.

Deontic rules of reason would correspond to the rules of a sound deductive calculus (like *modus ponens* or *reductio ad absurdum*), or to the rules of induction, scientific methodology, or Bayesian theory confirmation.

A virtue-based conception is certainly possible. Anthony Kenny (1992: 6–8) proposed reason as an Aristotelian mean between scepticism and credulity, and John Henry Newman (1985) proposed that there is an *illative sense*, as the theoretical counterpart to Aristotle's *phronesis* (practical wisdom). Such intellectual and cognitive virtues involve a sort of know-how: knowing how to form and to modify beliefs and intentions. (See also Sosa 1991 and Zagzebski 1996.)

The notion of the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties has both a naturalistic and non-naturalistic version, exemplified by Ruth Garrett Millikan (1984) and Alvin Plantinga (1993b).

The three kinds of norms can be inter-related, and perhaps even reduced, to one another. For example, one might take deontic principles to express the definition of virtuous behaviour, either reducing principles to virtue or virtues to principle, or one might take both principles and virtues to be grounded ultimately in teleological proper functioning.

Norms can be moral, prudential, or epistemic. It seems that being rational in respect of thought or belief consists in conforming to or following the peculiarly *epistemic* norms of thought, while in the practical sphere, rational action consists in conformity to norms of prudence. Moral norms, if relevant at all to rationality, do not seem to be constitutive of the norms of rationality. In fact, the two dimensions of normativity seem to be mutually independent: a belief or an action might be rational and immoral, or moral and irrational. W.K. Clifford (Clifford 1879) argued that the latter case is impossible: we have a moral obligation to follow all epistemic norms in our thinking. However, there seem to be a number of plausible exceptions to Clifford's rule, as William James pointed out (James 1979).

1.1 Theoretical and practical reason

Beliefs and actions are necessarily connected (Swinburne 1992: 8–13). Rational agents will act in such a way as to maximize their chances of achieving a desired outcome (in the absence of competing desires). A popular model for encapsulating this connection is that of the norm of maximizing expected utility. The so-called 'Dutch Book' theorems reveal that any coherent agent must be representable as maximizing expected utility in accordance with a consistent system of preferences and a set of probability judgments that conforms to the classical probability calculus (with, as we shall see, the possible exception of the Archimedean principle) (Ramsey 1931).

Can preferences or values be irrational, or is irrationality assignable only to judgments of 'fact'? Intransitivity of preferences leads to incoherence: e.g., preferring ham to bacon, bacon to sausage, and sausage to ham. In addition, some preferences seem absurd *materially* and not just formally. Consider David Hume's hypothetical man who prefers scratching himself (even in the absence of an itch) to any other outcome, or Anscombe's example of a man wanting to eat sand (for no particular reason). Preferences ought to guide us toward outcomes that are objectively superior – toward states of human flourishing. Thus, we can ask whether the preferences embodied in religious activity (or in refraining from such activity) are themselves reasonable, a question that forces us to consider whether salvation (as conceived by one religion or another) is a central component of human flourishing.

These reflections on maximizing expected utility and its justification lead naturally to a further question: Do preferences or subjective probabilities obey Archimedes' principle? That is, can there be infinite ratios in the values of our utility or probability functions: relatively infinite utilities, or infinitesimal probabilities? The Dutch Book arguments by themselves provide no

reason why not, and there are many examples (drawn from both religion and secular life) that suggest that a rational agent might well be representable by hyper-real valued probabilities and utilities. Graham Oppy (Oppy 2006b) suggests that we have some reasons to doubt this, based on certain paradoxes involving infinite sums of the value of possible outcomes. However, non-Archimidean (infinite) differences in values and probability are not needed to generate these paradoxes. Consequently, it is not clear at this point whether paradoxes involving infinite sums of finite measure provide good grounds for being skeptical about relatively infinite measures. (See Robinson 1966, McClennen 1994, Herzberg 2011, and Section 3.3 ‘Faith as partly independent of rational belief’, below.)

1.2 Reason as it pertains to thought and belief

Let’s focus in this section on reason as it applies to thoughts, beliefs, and other purely cognitive states and acts. If we think of reason as one of our faculties for forming, sustaining, and modifying beliefs or for acquiring knowledge, we have to consider the question of what other cognitive faculties we have. Which of these faculties, if any, are excluded by talk of human ‘reason’?

Since the individuation of such faculties and capacities is difficult, we could take ‘reason’ to represent the human capacity for knowledge, incorporating the right use or exercise of all of our cognitive powers. This has its drawbacks: we will, for instance, have to take having 20/20 vision as a norm of ‘reason’ in this broad sense. However, it is difficult to exclude the nature of the ‘given’ (sense data and the deliverances of memory and introspection) entirely from an inquiry into reason. We can classify someone as *unreasonable* on the basis of a poor fit between a person’s sensory beliefs and the actual environment: one who perceives inanimate objects as animate, or *vice versa*, for example.

In a similar way, one whose *a priori* judgments deviate wildly from the truth is in the grip of a form of irrationality. A systematic misjudging of the probabilities of possible hypotheses provides another example, although this case has been disputed by subjective Bayesians, who suppose that any logically coherent set of judgments about the prior probabilities of hypotheses are equally rational. Philosophers as diverse as David Lewis and Richard Swinburne disagree, taking rationality to require a certain bias toward simpler hypotheses, since without such bias, no induction can be rationally justified.

1.3 Self-evidence and the evident

Reason in the broad sense governs not only inference but also the acquisition and retention of non-inferred or *basic* beliefs. A basic belief that is rational (for a given person in a given condition and circumstances) can be called ‘properly basic’ or ‘evident’. Are there criteria for proper basicity? Following Descartes, we might suppose that a belief is evident if and only if it is indubitable (for the person in that condition and those circumstances). Let’s call this the ‘indubitability theory’ of the evident.

However, this Cartesian standard is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for proper basicity. If one’s faculties are malfunctioning (e.g., if one is in the grip of an irresistible delusion), a belief may be subjectively indubitable and yet not objectively evident. Conversely, there are many beliefs (of the sort noted by Wittgenstein, Kenny, and Plantinga) that are properly basic and yet potentially dubitable, such as Wittgenstein’s belief that his name is ‘Ludwig Wittgenstein’ (Wittgenstein 1969: 96–99; Kenny 1992: 21–23; Plantinga 1983: 60). Such beliefs are dubitable, and yet if they were seriously questioned, it would bring down the whole framework of one’s view of the world, rendering any question of justification moot.

In addition, as Plantinga has argued (Plantinga 1983: 60–61), the indubitability theory of the evident obviously does not pass its own standard for proper basicality. It is psychologically possible (at least for many people) to doubt or even to disbelieve in that standard. Hence, an indubitabilist may not consistently believe in that standard without adequate proof or evidence. But what sort of evidence could be provided? It is not provable from universally accepted principles of logic or mathematics, nor is it empirically verifiable.

1.4 Meta-epistemology: how do we know what is reasonable?

Finding criteria for evident beliefs is part of a much wider problem: the discovery of general principles of epistemology. It may be that this quest is quixotic: perhaps the truths about epistemology are analogous to those of ethics as conceived of by a moral particularist like Jonathan Dancy (2004). Do we have good reason to believe that every fact about the reasonableness or unreasonableness of a belief or action is deducible from some general laws? An epistemological particularism that denies such general principles might be an attractive option for a certain kind of fideist, such as Kierkegaard, who seems to identify ‘objective’ reason with deducibility from *general* principles.

There are four possible sources of information about epistemology: self-evidence; the phenomenology of intrinsic certainty; induction and analogy from agreed-upon cases; and the scientific or metaphysical (and perhaps even the theological) investigation of the human mind and its workings.

1. Are all the principles of reason self-evident? In other words, if *P* is a true principle of epistemology, does everyone who understands *P* believe it (self-evidence)? The answer seems to be, No: most, if not all, principles of epistemology are controversial to a degree that seems incompatible with self-evidence. Even a principle as fundamental as the law of non-contradiction has been rejected.
2. Do all the principles of epistemology appear intrinsically certain? Some appear to be certain to many people. Once again, there are few principles that seem certain to everyone. In addition, we know that this appearance of certainty is not infallible, as demonstrated by the example of Frege’s naïve set theory (which seemed certain to Frege before it was proven to be inconsistent). Thus, it appears that epistemology cannot be a purely formal or *a priori* science.
3. Induction and analogy are useful methods, as the work of Thomas Reid or Roderick Chisholm demonstrates (Chisholm 1989). This method prescribes first collecting a large sample of paradigmatically reasonable and unreasonable beliefs and then looking for simple generalizations. The generalizations can then be tested against further intuitions about the reasonableness of test cases.

However, there is no guarantee of unanimity in results, when epistemological investigators do not fully agree on the initial data. Controversies about the data are frequently the case in many disputes over the rationality of religious belief. Some religious believers, like Alvin Plantinga (1983) or Austin Farrer (1964), will take some cases of basic religious belief as paradigms of rationality, while agnostic philosophers, like Anthony Kenny (1992) or Anthony Flew (1976), will take the same cases as paradigmatically irrational.

4. Finally, we can turn to the scientific and metaphysical investigation of the human mind as a source of information about what would constitute the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties. This was the Aristotelian method, and it has also been adopted by Darwinian epistemologists, like Ruth Millikan. As these examples demonstrate, the epistemological conclusions reached will depend on features about the large-scale theoretical framework in

place. Once again, we can expect large differences in results from theists and from naturalistic epistemologists, reflecting differences in philosophical anthropology. Theists, for example, will naturally attribute the formation of religious beliefs in a wide range of situations as the normal functioning of a *sensus divinitatis* (a natural sense of the divine, in Calvin's terminology), while naturalists might attribute the same beliefs to defects or 'design' imperfections to be expected in the jury-rigged products of natural selection. Consequently, atheists and religious believers of various kinds are going to have varying conceptions of the reasonable, based on different conceptions of the origin and purpose of human faculties, different experiences of the apparent certainty of religious propositions, and different sets of paradigm cases of the reasonable and the unreasonable.

It is possible that cognitive psychology provides information that would provide decisive evidence against the optimistic theistic hypothesis, if (for example) it could be shown that religious beliefs are invariably the product of mental disease or other malfunctioning. See Section 3.4 below.

We might appeal at this point to some sort of peer disagreement constraint: we should not posit any standard of reasonableness to which any of our 'epistemic peers' dissent, in effect lowering our standards to the greatest common denominator.

Peer Disagreement Principle (PDP): something cannot be a general truth about the extension of the term 'reasonable' unless it follows from an epistemological theory that would be embraced by everyone in our peer group, given access to all available evidence and arguments.

Recalcitrant dissent from any peers would be sufficient (given PDP) to falsify a proposed rule of reason. Who is the relevant 'peer' group? All human beings? All who are sane and competent? All who are fully rational? This last answer would reduce the PDP to a mere tautology, and yet it seems obvious that any other answer will deliver rational constraints that are far too weak.

In addition, and far more devastating, PDP is self-defeating, so long as it is resolutely rejected by any of our peers, as indeed it appears to be. Consequently, we are all inhabitants of a 'raft' of beliefs, as described by Otto Neurath (1983: 92). Epistemology cannot be prior to the rest of our beliefs but must draw on philosophy, science, common sense, and even theology or its denial (as the case may be). A certain kind of circularity, not in reasoning but in the relation between epistemology and the rest of our beliefs, is a deep-seated feature of the human condition, as characteristic of naturalists as of theists.

1.5 Does it matter whether reason and religion are in conflict?

Suppose that all religious belief were epistemically flawed, a failure to achieve knowledge or even warranted belief. Assume also that all religiously motivated action were irrational, because based on irrational beliefs or preferences. Couldn't religion still be, at least on balance, a good thing? All of these assumptions are compatible with any particular religion's being true and really offering a road to an overriding good (salvation) for its practitioners.

This would be a problematic hypothesis for theistic religions: for those religions that hold that human beings and their environment were designed and created by good and wise God, the same being who acts as the author and principal agent of salvation. Why would such a God make even the partial destruction of created human faculties a necessary condition of salvation? Doing so would seem radically incoherent on God's part.

Such extremely anti-rational fideism would seem to be consistent with Manichaeism (the view that the saviour god was not our creator), but no modern world religion is Manichaean.

Even for non-theistic religions, the case for religion (on these suppositions) will be effective only in the case of damaged human beings, and even then, only to human beings whose rational capacities are damaged in very specific ways. Even Pascal's wager would not apply, since, if successful, it validates the practical rationality of religious action. So, there would seem to be good reason for defenders of religion to defend its rationality.

2. What is religious faith?

Faith is whatever internal state is required for genuine religiosity. A religious life consists in some external and internal actions, undertaken for specifically religious motives, that is, in pursuit of some kind of 'salvation' or 'blessedness' for oneself and others. This 'supernatural' end must consist in some good that is not constituted in the normal way by mundane conditions, such as pleasure, survival, or the successful completion of other space-time-bounded activities.

2.1 Belief and religious faith

Every religious tradition corresponds to some body of propositions, whose truth is in some sense assumed or presupposed by those who act in accordance with the religion's precepts and recommendations.

An internal condition of faith is needed to distinguish genuine from feigned or hypocritical religiosity. The presence of such genuine faith turns not on degree of belief in the propositions making up the religious tradition, but on one's motives or reasons for acting. One who acts piously out of a desire to obtain 'salvation' (as defined by a religious tradition) for oneself or others is genuinely pious or religious, whether or not the faithful person *believes* the body of propositions defining the tradition.

However, belief is not entirely irrelevant to such genuinely religious action. There is a necessary connection between belief and action – belief is essentially action-guiding, and human action is essentially rational. Faithful people must at least believe that salvation is an epistemic possibility: they must not take such salvation to be certainly unattainable. They must also believe that the actions recommended by their religion make salvation more and not less likely. Richard Swinburne (1981: 117) describes well the subtle relation between the religious believer and his beliefs:

He prays for his brethren, not necessarily because he believes there is a God who hears his prayer, but because only if there is can the world be set right. He lives the good life not necessarily because he believes that God will reward him, but because only if there is a God who will reward him can he find the deep long-term well-being for which he seeks.

2.2 Modes of belief and acceptance

Since rationality applies to belief and similar cognitive states, something has to be said by way of a taxonomy of such states. In particular, a number of philosophers have proposed that there is a fundamental distinction between beliefs and acts of *acceptance*.

Non-linguistic animals seem to be guided by beliefs or belief-like states. Scholastic philosophers talk of such animals having an 'estimative power' that is analogous to human reason: a

kind of natural attunement of their nervous systems to their environment via their senses and memory. The American philosopher George Santayana (1955) spoke of certain human beliefs as instances of 'animal faith'. Explicit human judgments seem to lie within a 'space of reason' (to use John McDowell's phrase), as opposed to the 'space of causes' within which are located instances of animal faith (McDowell 1996). Human judgments are subject to rational norms, in the first and second senses discussed in the previous section: deontic rules and the standards of the intellectual virtues, in a way that the implicit representations of animal faith are not.

Both animal faith and intellectual judgment can be a matter of degree, corresponding to different degrees of certainty or probability, but in different ways. We can measure the degree of certainty corresponding to some tacit representational state by assuming that it will normally interact with the degrees of belief in other states and degrees of desire in order to produce decision-theoretically coherent action (immune to Dutch books). In the case of explicit judgments, the probability is part of the content of the judgment, rather than an aspect of the strength with which the representation is embraced.

There are good grounds for at least a two-way distinction among kinds of affirmative cognitive states: animal belief and explicit judgment. Is there a third category: states that are involuntary, potentially implicit, and dispositional, and yet firmly within McDowell's space of reason, subject at least to the norms associated with proper functioning and with the intellectual virtues? Many philosophers, including Richard Swinburne and Bernard Williams, have defended the existence of such involuntary and yet rational states. For the sake of clarity, I will use the term 'animal faith' for the sub-rational representational state, 'belief' for a state that is rational but involuntary and potentially tacit, and 'acceptance' for the act by which one makes a voluntary and rational commitment to the truth of a proposition.

Bernard Williams has argued that all belief-like states must be involuntary, leaving no room for the category of acceptance ('Deciding to Believe', in Williams 1973: 136–51). According to Williams, any state like belief must, by its very essence, be aimed at the truth. Consequently, one cannot coherently choose to believe that p without aiming thereby at the truth, which would mean that one already (prior to one's decision) believed that p to be the truth. Similarly, one cannot choose to believe a proposition with a subjective probability other than that proposition's subjective probability prior to one's decision.

Nonetheless, Michael Bratman (1992) has argued convincingly for the need for a distinction between belief and acts of acceptance (Bratman 1992, Levi 1967, Cohen 1992, and, for a dissenting view, Moore 1994). Bratman offers five cases in which it makes sense to accept a proposition one does not yet believe:

1. To simplify our reasoning. When we engage in practical reasoning, it is not always cost-effective for us to take into account events of extremely small probability, nor can we effectively compute the conditional probabilities needed to assess the chances of complex conjunctions. To simplify these processes, it makes sense simply to accept as true propositions with very high subjective probability.
2. To deal with asymmetries in the cost of error. In some cases, the costs of being wrong in one way are much higher than the costs of any alternative belief. In other words, it may be very costly to believe not- p when p is true, but not costly at all to believe p when not- p is true. In such a case, it may make sense to accept that p , even if the probability of p is far below $\frac{1}{2}$. For example, consider the proposition that I'm not a brain in a vat. If I am a brain in a vat and wrongly believe myself not to be, the error is not very costly, since my prospects for controlling my fate or increasing my stock of knowledge are very meager if I'm merely a brain encased in a vat. Conversely, to believe that I am a brain in a vat if I am

- not is extremely costly, both in terms of successful action and the acquisition of further knowledge.
3. Needs of social cooperation. When several agents must collaborate in their deliberations and decisions, it is essential that they operate on the basis of a stock of assumptions that are common knowledge among them. It can be rational for an agent to accept the entire body of common-ground assumptions, even if some are not believed with certainty to be true.
 4. Special relations to others, such as moral obligations to believe others. Relations of loyalty and gratitude, including bonds of friendship and partnership, may entail a commitment to accept the other's trustworthiness and truthfulness even in the face of plausible doubt. One should, at least to some extent, discount evidence against one's friends' trustworthiness, even when the evidence would be conclusive in the case of those to whom one lacks such a bond.

Van Fraassen (1981) gives us a fifth reason: the need to maintain probabilistic coherency while recognizing our own fallibility. Our actions will be probabilistically incoherent (subject to 'Dutch strategies') if we assign any finite probability to the possibility that we might rationally come to accept something as evidence that is false. Van Fraassen suggests that the only way to escape this incoherency without an insane level of confidence in the infallibility of human reason is to employ voluntary acceptance in place of involuntary belief: we accept that everything we will rationally accept will be true, while believing that this must happen with less than perfect confidence. Probabilistic coherency is maintained by committing ourselves to our own future commitments.

Although Swinburne does not accept the belief/acceptance distinction, he does provide a sixth reason for distinguishing an acceptance-like state from the state of assigning a high probability to a proposition. According to Swinburne, we can be said to 'believe' a proposition so long as its subjective probability for us is higher than that of the relevant alternatives (Swinburne 1981: 3–8). If there is more than one relevant alternative, this makes 'belief' or 'acceptance' in this case consistent with a probability of less than $\frac{1}{2}$.

We cannot simply identify accepting a proposition with its having a high degree of subjective probability. First, a proposition can have a high degree of probability without being acceptable, as the lottery paradox demonstrates: that any ticket will lose is highly probable, yet one cannot reasonably accept that it will lose, since this would involve acting in a way that ignores the very real probability that it might win. One cannot even identify acceptance with a subjective probability of 1, since there can be real possibilities with a probability of zero. For example, the probability that a dart with an infinitely fine point will strike any given point on the target is zero, despite the fact that it must strike some point. Introducing infinitesimal probabilities does not help, as Alexander Pruss (2012) has recently demonstrated.

Each of these six cases of rational acceptance without belief is relevant to religion:

1. If all of one's decisions are guided by the assumption of the truth of a religious framework, continuing the internal representation of that assumption as uncertain would be otiose and a waste of scarce cognitive resources. Better simply to accept it and employ it without qualification in one's decision making.
2. Asymmetries in the cost of error correspond to Pascal's wager (Pascal 1961): to fail to believe in God given God's existence is far costlier than to believe in God given His non-existence. (See Section 3.3.)
3. Since religion is typically a social enterprise, it makes sense for individual believers to embrace the comprehensive 'creed' or doctrinal standards of a group, even if that believer

- finds some of the tenets of the creed to be uncertain, so long as the creed as a whole is more likely to be true than the comprehensive doctrines of the available alternatives.
4. Loyalty to one's tradition, family, and benefactors is relevant to the rationality of accepting religious teaching. This could include faith in the testimony of others concerning their religious experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary. The importance of such loyalty is greatly heightened when one believes that these witnesses are deputized messengers of God, such that to mistrust them is to mistrust God.
 5. Coherent religious action requires a firm commitment to fulfil one's commitments to the truth of the propositions of faith, come what may.
 6. A believer may accept his tradition as the most likely of the available alternatives. Religion can be a 'forced choice', to use William James's language. Since life is short, we cannot indefinitely postpone a decision for or against a religious life. If we do choose to embrace religion, we must choose among those communities and sets of practices that are in fact available to us. It is in most cases a practical impossibility to hedge one's bets by participating in several religions at once. Consequently, it makes sense to accept the theological framework of whichever is most likely to be true.

According to Bratman, acceptance is context-dependent: it is possible to accept the proposition that *p* in one context, in relation to one set of activities or projects, while not accepting it in other contexts. This context sensitivity does not seem to be possible in respect of religion: one whose religious commitments were context-sensitive in this way would be rightly characterized as being hypocritical or having only a feigned faith. However, there are reasons to think that the acceptance of a religious framework for one's life would be independent of context, embracing all of life. For most religions, the pursuit of salvation incorporates all other activities, in many cases by providing new motives for doing what one would have done anyway, but in some cases by insisting upon new and untrumpable demands.

3. Four models of the relation between faith and reasonable belief

3.1 Faith as an instance of reasonable belief

The simplest positive model takes religious faith to be simply the result of applying our ordinary rational faculties to the question of the truth of the crucial theological propositions. For example, C.S. Lewis defines the virtue of faith as nothing more than perseverance or stick-to-it-iveness: 'Now faith is the art of holding on to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods' (Lewis 1943: 123).

Similarly, Richard Swinburne takes inquiry into religious matters to be closely analogous to theory choice in science (Swinburne 2003, 2004). This evidentialist approach can also be seen in the recent revival of interest in the design argument, especially with reference to the 'fine-tuning' of cosmological and physical constants for life and with reference to the origin of life itself (see Manson 2003 and Murray 1998), and in first-cause cosmological arguments (Koons 2001, 2008, 2012, O'Connor 2012, and Pruss 2006).

These arguments involve a variety of modes of reasoning: deductive, Bayesian, and defeasible. Theists adopting this model typically complain that agnostics (like Mackie 1982, Sobel 2004, and Oppy 2006a) are guilty of special pleading or under-generalization, refusing to apply to theological questions those general principles (such as causality, the principle of sufficient reasoning, or inference to the best explanation) that they apply unquestioningly to other matters.

Kelly Clark (1990) has argued that theistic appeals to argument result in what could at best be described as ‘person-relative’ proofs, since they fail to persuade such intelligent and well-informed dissenters as Bertrand Russell or J.L. Mackie. In so arguing, Clark makes a tacit appeal to the peer disagreement principle, which we saw reason to reject above. A proof may be sufficient to compel all perfectly rational persons to assent, even though it fails to secure unanimity in the real world, since intelligent, well informed and well intended people may still fall short of perfect reasonableness (defined as perfectly proper functioning of the relevant faculties).

It is also possible for adherents of this model to take many religious beliefs as reasonable in the absence of any inference: as properly basic. A properly basic belief need not be groundless: it is part of the proper functioning of the human mind to form certain beliefs only in the context of appropriate kinds of experience or testimony. As Swinburne has argued, reason seems to support a principle of credulity applied generally to experience: experience involving the appearance as of the fact that *p* licenses the formation of properly basic belief that *p* (Swinburne 2004: 303–22). Religious experiences, both ordinary and extraordinary, often present the appearance of the presence of God. Such a principle of credulity can also be applied to testimony about the religious experiences of others.

This approach does, however, face the difficult problem of conflicting experience-reports from adherents of different faith traditions. Reports that contradict one another or that contradict the content of one’s own religious experience are rational defeaters of the basic belief that would otherwise be proper, resulting in a diminution of probability or the contraction of belief to some greatest common denominator. Peer disagreement also weakens the credibility of theistic arguments, unless one has independent grounds for discounting the rationality of the unconvinced.

Other critics of the simple model (such as Bishop 2007 and Moser 2008) argue that it fails to take into account that God may deliberately ‘hide’ His existence from the disinterested inquirer who has no intention of submitting to God’s authority, since providing such explicit knowledge would only compound the unbeliever’s alienation from God. Instead, God is interested in bringing about knowledge of His existence and nature only on terms that promote our spiritually valuable fellowship. Such life-transforming knowledge of God would be a form of knowing by doing (knowledge through active discipleship), as opposed to the knowledge of a passive spectator.

In addition, as John Hick (1966) argued, God’s placing Himself (at least initially) at some ‘cognitive’ or ‘epistemic’ distance from us may be essential to our development as free and autonomous centers of action.

3.2 Faith as enhanced or restored rational belief

The second model sees faith as a result of a specialized form of reason, especially adapted to the task of forming accurate religious belief, as opposed to the result of applying generic, content-independent principles of reason. A model of this sort has been defended historically by John Calvin and John Henry Newman (1985) and most recently by Alvin Plantinga (1983, 2000). The religious restoration of reason can take two possible avenues: enhanced capacity for properly basic beliefs (Plantinga 2000, Alston 1991) or enhanced capacity for inferences about religious matters (Newman 1985, Farrer 1964, Evans 2010).

On this second model, the existence of both unbelief and conflicting religious beliefs can be explained by reference to the cognitive or ‘noetic’ effects of sin (including ‘original sin’, the supposed inherited effects of the impiety of past generations). Spiritual regeneration through participation in repentance and participation in the practices and sacraments of the true faith

effect a restoration of perfect rationality, giving believers in it access to knowledge unavailable to unbelievers.

The existence of religious pluralism, that is, the co-existence of conflicting claims to such privileged knowledge, has often been taken as providing a powerful challenge to the second model (see Kraft 2007). Such a challenge depends once again on an appeal to the Peer Disagreement Principle, arguing that the members of one tradition cannot claim privileged access to rational insight so long as epistemic peers in other traditions make contradictory claims. However, the defender of the second model can always dispute the assumption that participants in other traditions are in fact epistemic peers (Koons 2006). The apparent ‘circularity’ of such a judgment is no indictment of this model, since all epistemologists must inescapably make controversial judgments about who counts as their peers.

3.3 Faith as partly independent of rational belief

In the first two models, the religious believer comes to be certain of the core propositions of the faith, with a subjective probability of 1 or nearly 1. On the third model, perfect faith is compatible with uncertainty, possibly even with a low subjective probability. The lower the probability that must be assigned to the creedal propositions for genuine faith to exist, the lower the epistemic standards concerning evidence for those propositions that must be met to secure the rationality of faith as a venture. The third model corresponds to what John Bishop (2007: 9) has called a ‘doxastic venture’:

To take a doxastic venture is to take a proposition to be true in one’s practical reasoning while recognizing that it is not adequately supported by one’s total available evidence.

Thomas Aquinas defended an early version of this venture model. Aquinas distinguishes between ‘living’ and ‘lifeless’ faith (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74, II-II q5 a2). Lifeless faith in doctrinal propositions requires a high degree of certainty, grounded in virtually undeniable signs of divine sanction. However, in the case of living or meritorious faith, the intellect is moved by the will to accept the revealed, as the will is moved to knowledge of and unity with God as the ultimate good. (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74, II-II q1 a4) In other words, the believer is moved to believe in the doctrines of the faith as the means to an end of supreme value. So long as faith in some particular form is the only or the most likely means to that end, it is rational to believe the corresponding doctrines, even if there is a significant chance of error. Aquinas’s definition of faith does not entirely disengage faith from evidence, however: there must be ‘weighty’ if inconclusive grounds for believing the doctrines to be true (Aquinas 1265–74/1964–74, II-II q2 a9).

Pascal’s wager is another version of this model. In the *Pensées*, Pascal spends a great deal of time and effort providing what he saw as ‘weighty’ reasons for believing in the existence of God and the truth of Christianity, but he concluded by arguing that asymmetries in the cost of error can make it reasonable to pursue faith wholeheartedly even in the presence of considerable uncertainty. Pascal’s wager can be given an entirely epistemic application, in the spirit of Isaac Levi (1967)’s model of the rational pursuit of truth. It is rational to accept a proposition, if by doing so one increases one’s chances of maximizing one’s total body of knowledge.

Pascal builds his argument around the claim that religion offers goods of infinitely greater value than competing ends. The argument doesn’t require that we take this claim literally: so long as the difference between the value of salvation and the value of secular ends is of an order of magnitude greater than the size of the gap between the probability of the truth of the

relevant theological proposition and absolute certainty, the greater size of the payoff will overwhelm the effect of the uncertainty.

In addition, the hypothesis that some outcomes may be subjectively of infinitely greater value to a rational agent is quite defensible. Frederik Herzberg has recently proved a representation theorem, demonstrating that a coherent agent with preferences over lotteries involving infinitesimal probabilities has a utility function that can be represented uniquely by means of Robinson's 'hyperreal' analysis (Herzberg 2011, Robinson 1966). Ratios of such hyperreal utilities can be infinitely great or infinitely small. Adopting such a model does force us to give up one claim that Pascal made: that adding a finite value to an infinite one makes no difference (Pascal 1961: 155). Hyperreal analysis requires that adding a finite number to an infinite number always results in a strictly greater number, and that multiplying an infinite number by a number less than 1 always results in a strictly lesser number. However, Pascal's assertion to the contrary is required neither by his theology nor by the logic of his argument.

Søren Kierkegaard's notion of infinite passion can provide the basis for further development of the third model. Kierkegaard suggested that the believer's infinite passion for union with God can overcome objective uncertainty about the truths of religion. Infinite passion consists in recognizing and responding to the infinitely great value of the supernatural good offered the believer. In *Fear and Trembling* (Kierkegaard 1983), Kierkegaard added to the model the 'second movement' of faith: its return to the world of mundane affairs, providing to each mundane decision a new layer of infinite significance in light of one's individual vocation from God. Every mundane choice takes on (on the assumption that God exists) infinite significance as an opportunity to move toward or away from harmony with God. As I have argued (Koons 1993), this reflection of faith into everyday life ensures that all *differences* in value between the possible outcomes of my choices are infinitely magnified on the supposition that God exists. As a result, the believer can safely ignore the possibility that God does not exist, no matter how likely that might be, so long as the existence of God has a finite, non-zero probability of truth. Thus, Kierkegaard, unlike Pascal, does not offer an argument based on infinite utilities for *seeking* faith: he offers a model according to which one with the right structure of infinite utilities *already has* faith. A Kierkegaardian utility function results in rational action that is indistinguishable from the action of one who judges the propositions of faith to be certain, even if the agent's actual probability for those propositions is quite low.

Once again, the skeptical hypothesis of envatted brains illuminates the argument. If my concerns are infinitely magnified on the supposition that what I perceive is real (including real family, friends, and worldly accomplishments), then it is rational for me to act in all cases as if I were certain that the skeptical hypothesis is false, however uncertain I am about its truth.

3.4 Faith as irrational

Following Plantinga (2000: viii-ix), we can recognize two kinds of objection to religious faith: *de facto* and *de jure*. A *de facto* objection is an argument for the falsity of some central proposition upon which faith depends. A *de jure* objection is an argument to the conclusion that faith is irrational, regardless of the truth or falsity of its central tenets.

De jure objections

No plausible charges of intransitivity in preferences have been made against religion. A critic of religion might charge that religious preferences are materially if not formally irrational, especially in their intensity with respect to supernatural and space-time-transcending conditions. However,

this charge depends on the falsity of religious doctrine: if the world really were as Christianity or other major religions paint it, the intensity of religious passion would be quite appropriate.

Other critics (Dennett 2007) suppose that successful scientific (naturalistic) accounts of religious belief provide undercutting defeaters of the rationality of religion: if religious beliefs and motives can be accounted for in terms of processes (neurological, biological, or cultural) that make no reference to God or the supernatural, then it might be supposed to be irrational to maintain them. However, this argument underestimates the resources of a theistic metaphysic: if God exists and is responsible for creating and sustaining all natural processes, then no process is truly independent of God. The believer is free to take the scientific accounts of religious belief as merely providing more information about how God has revealed His presence to His rational creatures.

We must instead distinguish between pathological and non-pathological processes. If the scientific account of religion demonstrates one or more religions to be the result of what are unambiguously defective cognitive processes, processes involving injury or disease, then this result would provide an undercutting defeater. There is, however, no current evidence of such defeaters. In fact, religiosity is positively correlated with both mental and physical health (Levin and Schiller 1989, Ferraro and Albrecht-Jensen 1991, Matthews, Larson and Barry 1993, Larson and Larson 1994, Pargament 1997, Stark 2012, Rosmarin, Bigda-Peyton, Kertz, Smith, Rauch, and Bjorgvinsson 2013).

De facto objections

The most common *de facto* objections concern the so-called 'problem of evil': the apparent incongruity between the supposed existence of an all-powerful and all-good deity and the existence of moral evil and undeserved suffering. This objection only pertains to those theistic religions that do embrace all three elements (a loving and all-powerful God, and the real existence of suffering). The argument from evil takes two forms: deductive and inductive. A deductive argument from evil, if successful, would provide a decisive objection to many forms of religion. However, such deductive arguments have failed to overcome the standard Free Will Defense (see Plantinga 1974c).

In the case of inductive arguments from evil, the aim is more modest: simply to show that the existence of God is unlikely relative to the available evidence concerning evil and suffering. Defenders of theistic religion have five possible responses. First, they might offer a theodicy that purports to show that God's existence is not unlikely, given the existence of evil. Second, they might concede that the existence of evil lowers somewhat the posterior probability of God's existence but contend that the positive evidence and arguments greatly outweigh this effect. Thirdly, they might embrace the position of 'skeptical theism' (Bergmann 2001), arguing that we cannot reasonably make any estimates of the probability of any quantity of evil, on the hypothesis that God exists, because the factors and parameters of such a hypothetical divine choice are so far beyond our cognitive capacities. Fourthly, some theists will embrace the third model of the relation between faith and reason, affirming the rationality of religious faith despite the improbability of theism on the total evidence.

Finally, theists can argue that if the probability of God's existence is 1, or if religion is accepted absolutely, then probabilistic counter-evidence would be irrelevant (Plantinga 2000: 475–79). If God's existence is part of the background information upon which all probability judgments are predicated, then the proposition that God exists must always have a probability of exactly 1, no matter how much evidence we acquire that is unlikely on that supposition.

However, if religious propositions have been accepted at least in part because of their high probability, either absolutely or relative to some alternative, then such probabilistic disconfirmation could be relevant.

4. Faith as a ground and guard of reason

Up to this point, we have examined faith by the standards of reason, to see if religious faith can be understood as an exercise of reason. It is possible to turn the question around and ask whether reason involves an exercise of faith. In *Orthodoxy*, G.K. Chesterton (1986: 236–37) argued that it does:

It is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all. ... In so far as religion is gone, reason is going. For they are both of the same primary and authoritative kind. They are both methods of proof which cannot themselves be proved. And in the act of destroying the idea of Divine authority, we have largely destroyed the idea of that human authority by which we do a long-division problem.

We can ask, for example:

- Why trust our rational intuitions in philosophy?
- In particular, why trust our intuitions of rational normativity?
- Why trust our intuitions of truth in logic or mathematics?
- Why trust science? In particular, why trust in our ability to make reliable choices of theories and research programs?
- Why trust the senses, as reliable indicators about objective reality?

To take just one example, it is far from obvious that the senses can be relied upon to give anything like reliable information about an objective world, without presupposing some sort of theistic design. Modern science suggests that none of the ‘secondary qualities’ revealed in sense perception (colour, smell, texture, etc.) correspond to real properties in the objects generating those perceptions. Why think that sensory impressions so pervasively permeated with fictional properties convey any objective information? Confidence in human cognition depends on believing that the objects of perception have a natural propensity to reveal themselves to us as they really are, and that we have a natural propensity to receive their revelation, a pair of propensities that seems best explained as a divinely orchestrated harmony.

In addition, human reasoning (both deductive and inductive) seems to require some awareness on our part of the fact (assuming it is a fact) that our conclusions really ‘follow from’ our premises. Without such awareness, at least tacit, there would be no difference between reasoning and mere free association, or between following the rules of good reasoning and merely conforming to a pattern. Thus, two facts are required for reasoning to be knowledge-generating: there must be some norms of rationality, and we must be able to know what those norms are. If to accept the reality of such norms is to engage in an essentially religious practice, or if real knowledge of those norms is possible only for those embracing a religious faith, then reason itself would prove to be grounded in faith. I will briefly consider three arguments to this effect below: (1) an argument appealing to the truthmakers of rational and epistemic norms; (2) an argument analogous to Benacerraf’s problem concerning mathematical knowledge; and (3) Plantinga’s evolutionary argument against naturalism.

4.1 *The truthmaker for rational norms*

What are the truthmakers for rational norms – that is, what in the world are they ultimately grounded in? There seem to be just four options: regularities in nature conceived of in non-teleological terms (without purpose or intrinsic end); social conventions; biological adaptation; or a set of *sui generis* normative facts. The first option has been widely criticized in contemporary analytic philosophy, from John McDowell (1996) to Hartry Field (2001: 368–70); see also Koons (2003) and Thomas Nagel (2012: Chapter 4). It seems clear that mere psychological regularities cannot constitute rational norms, since there can be regularities that are irrational or rational norms that are rarely if ever followed. This remains true even if we restrict our attention to regularities that are, as a matter of brute fact, reliably truth-producing. Genuinely rational norms would still be rational even if they were not, in some possible world, truth-conducive, and irrational standards would be irrational, even if they did lead to truth.

Social conventions also fail as an adequate ground for rational normativity, for much the same reason. The rationality or irrationality of an inference is independent of whether inferences of that sort are sanctioned by society. No society, for example, can make an inconsistent set of logical rules normatively binding. Moreover, the intentionality of human thought presupposes the existence of rational norms, since it is only in relation to such norms that we can make the distinction between right and wrong applications of our concepts to particular cases (Koons 2010). Since social convention in turn depends on intentionality, we cannot provide a non-circular account of normativity in terms of convention.

More promising for the naturalist is the appeal to evolutionary history, as proposed by Ruth Garrett Millikan (1984). According to Millikan, rational norms are grounded in the proper functioning of our cognitive systems, and that proper functioning can be defined in terms of functioning in precisely those ways that enabled our ancestors to reproduce themselves successfully. Nonetheless, this account faces three serious challenges. First, like the first two, it seems to give the wrong answer in a wide range of possible hypothetical cases, as argued by Plantinga (1993b: 199–210) and Rea (2002: 113–27). For example, a population subjected to artificial selection by a vicious regime might acquire an evolutionary history according to which some obvious logical error, like affirming the consequent, contributed to the survival of its ancestors. Second, Jerry Fodor (1992: 51–88) has argued that natural selection is too blunt an instrument to make the kind of extremely subtle and fine-grained distinctions among the contents of our thought that would be needed to ground epistemic norms. Finally, a biological approach to human proper functioning would have to take a strongly realist position on the existence of macroscopic objects (like people) and macroscopic phenomena (like human action) that is inconsistent with the thoroughgoing micro-physicalism inherent in materialism (Koons 2010). In addition, Millikan's account presupposes that properties like reproduction and survival can be reduced to non-teleological terms, which seems improbable. Successful reproduction requires the generation of a new entity with the same repertoire of proper functions.

If rational norms are *sui generis* facts, then devotion to reason is a form of religious faith – submission to super-human, super-natural authority, a point that has been made by Augustine of Hippo (1964: 49–68), Anselm of Canterbury (1998), and G.K. Chesterton (op. cit.).

4.2 *A Benacerraf-style argument for reference and knowledge of norms*

Moreover, if the norms of rationality are *sui generis* facts, distinct from the facts of the natural order, then naturalists face a grave difficulty in accounting for our knowledge of them (analogous to the problem of accounting for our knowledge of mathematical objects identified in Benacerraf

1973). In response to the work of Edmund Gettier, epistemologists have come to recognize that more is required for knowledge than internally justified true belief. Knowledge requires the right sort of connection between the belief and the fact that is known, a connection that involves some sort of causal relation. In most cases, the act of knowledge is partly an effect of its object (as in knowledge by sense perception, memory or testimony), in some cases the act and object are effects of a common cause (as when one knowingly anticipates an unperceived effect of something perceived), and sometimes the object is the effect of the act (as in executive knowledge: knowing what one is doing). However, in each case some sort of causation is required.

A causal connection between the norms of reason and the human mind would require a supernatural cause: for instance, a creator and designer of humankind whose nature encodes the norms. At the very least, there must be some essentially rational power in the world that is responsible in part for human cognitive dispositions. If human beings were part of a world that is causally closed and fundamentally non-rational in nature, then knowledge of the norms would be impossible. (See also Hasker 2001: 6–73; Willard 2000; Reppert 2003; Nagel 2012: Chapter 4.)

The case of theory choice in science provides another argument for a supernatural cause, as I argued in Koons (2000). Theory choice in science (especially in fundamental physics) involves a pervasive preference for a certain kind of simplicity or elegance, an aesthetic value. For scientific knowledge to be possible, this preference for simplicity must be reliably truth-generating. However, simplicity can be reliable as a guide to the truth only if there is some mechanism ensuring a real bias toward simplicity of the right kind in the actual laws of nature. Such a mechanism would have to be a cause of the laws' being as they are, but since the fundamental laws of nature pervade the natural order, a cause of the laws would have to be supernatural.

4.3 Plantinga's defeater argument against naturalism

Plantinga's evolutionary argument against naturalism (Plantinga 1993b: Chapter 12; see also Beilby 2002) can also be turned to defeat any naturalistic claim to know the norms of reason. Anyone who denies that human beings are designed must rely solely on natural selection to explain our complex natural abilities, including our innate cognitive capacities. Natural selection is concerned only with fitness for reproduction: it is completely indifferent to whether the adaptations it selects are reliable at getting to the truth. In particular, since rational norms exist outside a closed system of natural causes (since there is always a gap between actual performance and rational competence), success or failure at capturing these norms can contribute nothing to any organism's reproductive fitness. Consequently, we have good grounds for suspecting that our own cognitive faculties are in fact not reliable at discovering the truth about the norms of reason. These grounds provide a rational defeater of any belief that we have about those rational norms, and therefore also a rational defeater of any inferred belief whatsoever, since justifiable inference depends on justified belief in the inferential norms being followed.

Theists, in contrast, are immune to these worries, since they lack any good grounds for suspecting that God would leave us ignorant of the norms of reason.

COGNITIVE FOUNDATIONS OF RELIGION

Todd Tremlin

Introduction: the cognitive turn

Imagine a particular exhibit that might easily be found in a museum of science and industry. The room housing the exhibit is long and narrow, nondescript save for a gray rectangular structure running from one end to the other, as if the curator has decided to display an extended tool shed. The aluminum shell of the structure is the height of an average person and broken only by a row of two-by-two-foot windows evenly spaced along each side. At first glance, the exhibit is neither visually appealing nor is its educational purpose immediately obvious. Stranger still, the exhibit has attracted the attention of a gathering of school-age children.

As you watch, the children swarm to the opposite end of the room. There is a moment of silence as they disappear around the far end of the structure. Suddenly, you hear a whistle blast and the whirl of machinery engaging. Simultaneously, the children come running back along the side of the structure, faces filled with glee. At the near end, they huddle together once more, visibly trembling with anticipation. After a minute or two, the sound of machinery fades, concluding with the chime of a bell. At the end of the structure a trapdoor snaps open and something comes tumbling out into a catch bin. One of the children steps forward and removes the object. As you watch, the child tears into plastic packaging and holds up, to the delight and envy of the rest, a bright new yo-yo. Erupting with laughter, the children dash off into the museum's crowded main hall.

Amused but not yet comprehending, you retrace the children's course. At the far end of the structure you find a sign welcoming you to the Industrial Revolution. Beneath the sign is a slot like those on vending machines. Beside this is a large red button, most of the paint rubbed off from use. Intrigued, you feed \$1 into the slot, press the button, and hear the familiar sounds of machinery again coming to life. Slowly you sidle along the side of the exhibit, and when you reach the first window, you realize that the structure houses a miniature factory meant to demonstrate the mechanical complexities of an assembly line. At the first window you observe robotic arms retrieve half-orbs of transparent plastic and send them at walking pace down a conveyor belt. At the next window you watch as the two halves are fused together with a small metal axis before proceeding onward. With each new window you watch the work progress: a string attached and spooled; a sheen of color added; the whole encased in cellophane and labeled. In a few minutes you have walked the span of the structure. The bell chimes, the trap door opens, and, momentarily child-like, you claim the freshly made yo-yo.

This imaginary museum exhibit aptly illustrates how the majority of modern consumer goods are constructed. The myriad objects that surround us were brought into being by a raft of finely designed tools and machines. But this imaginary museum exhibit also stands as a useful metaphor for two topics central to the discussion below. The first is the human brain. The structure of the brain and the means by which it does its work are markedly similar to the operation of an assembly line. Perceptions, emotions, ideas, and actions are the end products of specialized mental mechanisms. Second, this imaginary museum exhibit demonstrates the need to reorient the way we study human-related subjects. Like the children's fixation on the yo-yo, academic analysis has traditionally focused on finished products: a piece of music, a work of literature, an ethical stance, a political system – all the many artifacts that comprise human culture. But culture is the residue of cognition. To fully understand the nature of a finished product, it is necessary to look through the windows at the cognitive processes involved in its creation.

The same can be said for the forms of thinking we call 'religion'. Since its formal beginnings, the academic study of religion has been dominated by interpretive methodologies ranging from theology, philosophy, and phenomenology to structuralism, symbolism, and feminism (Cunningham 1999; Stausberg 2009). As interesting as this work might be, it has largely failed to illuminate fundamental issues, such as where religious ideas come from and how they work. Behind the lack of satisfying explanatory approaches looms the specter of 'sacredness', the notion that religion is an exceptional category set apart from the mundane and therefore beyond the pale of science. At best, so the thinking goes, an empirical investigation of religion reduces away that which makes it unique; at worse, it kills the very thing it seeks to explain.

In recent years, however, the study of religion, like other subjects bracketed in the humanities, has been teetering on the edge of a remarkable paradigm shift. After the 'Cognitive Revolution' (the last quarter of the twentieth century) and the 'Decade of the Brain' (the 1990s), it is now, in the new millennium, intellectually recalcitrant to discuss religious thinking and experience without direct reference to mental architecture and function. The 'black box' of the behaviorists has been made transparent by a consortium of brain specialties and the advent of powerful neuroimaging technologies. It is commonplace today to point out that the brain mediates everything we perceive, feel, and think. The excitement now lies in applying this truth to sociological phenomena.

With respect to religion, this effort is firmly established as the 'cognitive science of religion' (Barrett 2004; Boyer 1994; Tremlin 2006). This research program represents a synthesis of state-of-the-art cognitive science and traditional religion studies. Cognitive science is the study of the mind and how it thinks. Cognitive scientists explore the structures of the brain and their respective functions, with an eye to making sense of our perceiving, thinking selves. The cognitive science of religion takes the methods and findings of cognitive science – together with insights drawn from cognate disciplines such as anthropology, archaeology, evolutionary psychology, and philosophy – and applies them to the specific activity of religion. It is an approach that explores how the mind originates and shapes religious thinking and behavior.

Since its inception in the 1990s, the cognitive science of religion has emerged as a leading theoretical approach for explaining the religious mind. By probing the nature of human thought, investigators working in the field are uncovering the causes of fundamental features of religion, including why people tend to be religious, how minds generate and transmit religious ideas, why these ideas are ubiquitous and universally similar, why religious rituals follow predictable patterns, and how cognitive equipment constrains the content and form of religious systems (Andresen 2000; Lawson and McCauley 1990; Pyysiäinen and Anttonen 2002; Slone 2006). This chapter outlines the argument for viewing religion as a mental phenomenon,

highlights some of the cognitive processes that enable and animate religious reflection, and introduces the significance of the cognitive approach for the contemporary study of religion.

The architecture of the mind

If the cognitive revolution has taught us anything, it is that we cannot understand what we think until we first understand *how* we think. Sensations, thoughts, decisions, our very sense of ‘self’, are created by the mental machinery of the brain (Damasio 2010; Hood 2012). Cognitive science works to delineate the links between the parts, processes, and products that comprise human consciousness.

This is by no means an easy task. Given the incredible intricacy of the brain – some 100 billion neurons wired together via 100 trillion interconnections – knowledge about its architecture and operation necessarily comes from a number of related fields. What is referred to in the singular as ‘cognitive science’ is in fact a highly interdisciplinary endeavor. For example, neuroscience, which studies the brain at the cellular level, provides an anatomical foundation. Consultation with computer science offers insights into computational processes and organization. Developmental psychology helps to clarify what mental capacities are innate as opposed to those that are acquired. Understanding the brain’s biological heritage is also requisite, so interaction with comparative and evolutionary psychology is essential. And, while it is unfortunate, much of what we know about how healthy brains work comes from the study of brain disorders and injuries.

Even a cursory review of such research would outstrip the scope of this chapter. Of the domains of mentation that interest cognitive scientists – e.g., attention, communication, decision-making, imagination, learning, and memory – the focus here is on certain aspects of perception (how the brain identifies and interprets the external environment) and conceptualization (how the brain forms and employs ideas). Likewise, of the many insights into mental operation confirmed by cognitive science, four are particularly salient to the current discussion.

First, ‘the mind is a complex system of cognitive and emotional faculties implemented in the brain which owe their basic design to the processes of evolution’ (Pinker 2011: xxiii). The shaping forces of natural selection have designed neural circuitry, just as they have designed eyeballs, stomachs, and hands. And like these body parts, the brain, too, is an adapted organ. The functioning of the brain evolved in response to challenges faced by ancestral humans. It has its specific architecture and its specific set of mental processes because this architecture and these processes advantaged survival and reproduction. Understanding thinking and behavior requires knowledge of human evolutionary history. Evolved cognition is the skeleton key to human nature (Dunbar, Gamble, and Gowlett 2010).

Second, many aspects of cognition are innate. Innateness implies that particular ways of thinking, like the brain structures that support them, are biologically endowed rather than learned. The mind is not a blank slate awaiting cultural inscription but possesses already at birth the capacities to interface with the natural and social worlds it inhabits (Bloom 2004; Pinker 2002). These prewired intelligences and cognitive predispositions continue to guide perception, emotion, thought, and action throughout the lifespan. The operation of innate mental mechanisms is easily demonstrated through observation and experimentation. One sign that a mental faculty is innate is that it is universally expressed, regardless of cultural setting (Brown 1991). Classic examples include the ability to read facial expressions, early language acquisition, and the intuitive knowledge associated with folk biology, folk psychology, and folk physics.

Third, innate function is tied closely to the brain’s modular design. Human cognition emerges from a constellation of dedicated, functionally specialized mental mechanisms (Kurzban

2010; Marcus 2008). The brain is not a unitary general-purpose problem-solver but a kluge of independent though interconnected modules, sometimes tightly localized in the brain, sometimes spread across neighboring regions. Modularity is responsible for the instant, efficient, effortless nature of human perception, thought, and response. The aforementioned ability to read facial expressions is the result of a mental module designed specifically for this purpose. The full suite of functionally specialized modules ranges from fundamental mechanisms responsible for each mode of perception, to prosocial devices that subserve interpersonal interaction, to higher-order facilitators of metarepresentation (Barkow, Cosmides, and Tooby 1992). Direct stimulation of brain structures, faculty-loss due to brain damage, and neuroimaging studies confirm the modularity model of the mind.

Fourth, most of the mental processes that undergird perception and conceptualization are nonconscious. The reasoning, deliberative, reflective mode of thinking – a hallmark of the human species – is dependent on mental processes that occur automatically, incorrigibly, and below the level of conscious awareness (Gazzaniga 2008; Vedantam 2010). In the same way that the brain involuntarily oversees bodily functions and instigates physical movement, so too it conceals most of the computational, inferential, and predictive processes involved in interpreting and engaging the world. Extraordinary nonconscious processes hide behind every routine act or experience: maintaining balance, three-dimensional vision, object identification, grasping a coffee cup, erupting bits of memory, the cascading imagery of a daydream. The nonconscious operation of the mind can also be teased out through trickery. Visual illusions ranging from real-world mirages to graphic designs like the Necker cube dramatically illustrate how perceptual processing, like many other aspects of cognition, takes place beyond conscious control.

These basic architectural aspects of the brain have prompted researchers to provide metaphors for how the mind works. The brain has been compared to a computer bundled with powerful software, a Swiss army knife sporting multiple gadgets, and a well-equipped workshop. Equally usable is the museum exhibit imagined at the start of this chapter. Housed within the skull is a wondrous organ that, while infinitely complex, is both structurally and functionally quite like a sophisticated factory. Structurally, the human brain is fitted with precisely engineered mental machines that perform specific tasks and are largely automated. Functionally, the human brain builds precepts and concepts in the same way that goods are built on assembly lines. Perceiving and thinking is a *constructive* process. From raw materials such as light, shape, and motion, the brain fabricates our subjective experience of reality. Similarly, the brain manufactures ideas using innate knowledge, prewired inference systems, personal experience, and learning. Whatever the case, specialized mental machinery contributes to the finished product, be it a vivid quale of the color red, the recognition of a familiar face, or the representation of a horse. Which mental tools and processes are engaged depends on the task at hand. Some mental tools complete all the requisite work on their own; others do their job then pass the product off to different tools further down the line.

The current model of the mind yields some consequential implications for the study of human-related subjects, particularly religion. The first is the seriousness with which we must take both the centrality of the brain and the cognitive foundations of culture. In lieu of ghosts in the machine or homunculi, the brain itself is responsible for creating each person's mental world. We have no direct access to reality save for the mental simulation projected in the theater of the mind. Drawing on crude, often ambiguous information gathered by the senses, the brain renders a serviceable, yet nevertheless contrived, model of the environment. In Chris Frith's (2007: 111) arresting turn of phrase, 'our perception of the world is a fantasy that coincides with reality'. The same holds true for our thought life. Just as the brain is busy transforming photons into visible objects and vibrations into recognizable sounds, so, too, it is at work emoting,

planning, formulating beliefs, and motivating action. It is impossible to make sense of the things people experience, think, and do without reference to the mind. Shifting to the level of culture does not undo this fact. Socially shared ideas, practices, institutions, and technologies are all products of mental activity. Cultural phenomena, as Dan Sperber (1996) points out, originate as *mental representations*, are transmitted to other minds as *public representations*, and end up retained as durable *cultural representations*. Any robust explanation for the presence, content, or form of a specific cultural activity must take account of its noncultural (i.e., cognitive) foundations.

Second, the cognitive approach seriously challenges the notion of cultural relativism. Parallel to other long-standing dictums in the social sciences – the mind as a *tabula rasa*, the primacy of custom over biology – is the claim that cultural diversity is a barrier to generalized descriptions of people and their activities. Human behaviors and forms of thinking, it is argued, are local, relative, and unique. This anthropological canard is belied by extensively documented cross-cultural universals and the discovery of their underlying mental mechanisms. As David Linden (2007: 222) reminds us: ‘Every human culture has language and music, and we are happy to study the neurobiological bases of these phenomena; every human culture has a form of marriage, and we study the neurobiological basis of pair bonding as well’. And so on with nearly every common human behavior. Because the modern brain, with its many specialized devices and corresponding processes of thought, is characteristic of *Homo sapiens* as a species, the way people think and the ideas they produce are largely the same for everyone everywhere. Having minds that are predisposed to think in consistent, predictable ways means that all people everywhere build concepts using the same procedures and, ultimately, represent and interact with the world in similar ways. A standardized mental operating system – properties of the mind that are common to all – results in a wide range of persistent representations. This is equally true of the cross-cultural universal that is religion. While individual religions appear to vary enormously, the contrasts between them lose a great deal of their sharpness when they are examined more closely. The cognitive approach reveals that the ideas and practices that lie at the core of religious systems are limited, constrained, and quite similar.

Lastly, knowledge of mental architecture contradicts the aforementioned belief that religious thought is somehow unlike other kinds of thought, and that religious ideas cannot be explained in the same way as ‘ordinary’ ideas. At the level of cognition, religious concepts are not ‘special’ kinds of thoughts, and contrary to recent quests for so-called ‘god spots’ in the brain, there are no mental structures or processes specifically dedicated to religious reflection. Religious concepts are generated by the same mental mechanisms that produce all other kinds of concepts. Many of the marvelous thoughts humans entertain rise well above the level of brute existence, but they can nevertheless be understood as by-products of cognitive skills and tacit forms of knowledge designed to accomplish more mundane calculations. Religious ideas – some of the most sublime uses of the human mind – rest on garden-variety forms of thinking. As E. Thomas Lawson (2000: 79) contends, ‘whatever it takes to explain how minds work generally is sufficient to explain how religious minds work’.

Cognitive foundations of religious thought

The cognitive science of religion is demonstrating that the same perceptual, emotional, and cognitive faculties used for the quotidian tasks of life also support religion. Substantiating this position requires isolating specific mental mechanisms responsible for the generation and transmission of religious concepts. While researchers in the field continue to identify distinct mental mechanisms that contribute to religious thinking, two are now well established as foundational to the creation of religious concepts: the *agency detection device* and *theory of mind*. As expected, these

mental mechanisms are primitive, part of the core architecture of the mind, and central to survival.

For humans as for many other species, the elemental concerns of life revolve around sustenance, safety, sex, and status. These concerns in turn involve interaction with other living beings, or 'agents'. Because agents are the most relevant things in the environment, it is essential that brains come prepared to effectively detect and differentiate objects and agents. A person who fails to recognize buzzing coils as a snake is unlikely to fare for long. A person who can't distinguish another human from a tree is not fit for social life. Though objects are important, agents deserve special attention. Objects are inanimate, predictable, and generally harmless. Agents are self-motivated, capricious, and capable of both beneficial and exploitive behaviors. Anticipating and successfully reacting to agents requires the initial step of discerning them within otherwise inchoate surroundings. The mental mechanism dedicated to this task is commonly called the agency detection device. This powerful mental tool constantly scans for the presence of agents, effortlessly parsing the world into animate and inanimate, thing and being. The agency detection device is the epitome of modular design; its operation is quick, automatic, nonconscious, and evident in infancy.

But we can add another adjective to this list of characteristics that reveals more about the agency detection device's role in our mental lives. The agency detection device is not just quick, automatic, and nonconscious, it is also *hyperactive*. Because it is so important that we rapidly recognize agents – and in particular other human agents – the agency detection device is functionally hypervigilant, hypersensitive, and therefore prone to over-attribute agency. In addition to instantaneously identifying the people and creatures that cross our paths, the agency detection device is cued by signs, traces, and unusual events that indirectly suggest the presence of an agent. A rustling bush, creaking floorboards, moving objects, coincidental occurrences, even animated shapes, as famously demonstrated by Fritz Heider and Mary-Ann Simmel (1944), easily trigger an attribution of agency. The tenacity of the agency detection device makes frequent appearances in daily life: we sense things in the dark, see shadows as people, and startle at unexpected noise and movement.

As these examples show, the agency detection device is not perfect; it can easily sound false alarms. Having a hyperactive agency detection device leaves us open to annoying practical jokes and unnecessary rushes of adrenaline. Yet when survival is at stake, false alarms are advantageous. The lion beside the path may in fact turn out to be a rock. The ominous person you think you see standing in the alley may be, upon closer inspection, just a rubbish can. But such mistakes are harmless. Failing to see the lion or the mugger is not. So nature accepts the trade-off between speed and accuracy. It is better to be safe than sorry. Stewart Guthrie (1993) has argued persuasively that our incorrigible proclivity to suspect agency results from an evolved, hardwired 'strategy of perception'. When in doubt, the agency detection device assumes the presence of an agent until proven otherwise.

One inevitable, seemingly frustrating, but certainly provocative result of having a hyperactive agency detection device is *pareidolia* – the psychological phenomenon of perceiving patterns where none exist. Because the agency detection device is necessarily tightly strung, it is prone to mistakes and misattributions, to see agents where none are in fact present. Iconic instances of pareidolia abound. In 1921, Swiss psychologist Hermann Rorschach launched the celebrated technique of using a patient's perceptions of ambiguous inkblots to assess personality traits, emotional functioning, and thinking processes. In 1976, Viking I's photographs of shadowy plateaus in the Cydonia region on Mars left people seeing a humanoid face and speculating about alien civilizations. The State of New Hampshire lionized its 'Old Man of the Mountain', stoically gazing out over Franconia Notch, until the weathered granite cliffs collapsed in 2003.

Whether in the laboratory, the natural world, or the world of pop culture, we readily and quite naturally ‘see’ agency everywhere. We perceive faces in clouds, hear voices on the wind, apprehend patterns in randomness, anthropomorphize objects, and respond to advertisers’ personified products.

How does the agency detection device and its idiosyncratic functional design relate to religion? It should be apparent that these provocative yet quite natural examples of pareidolia are but one step removed from what might be dubbed ‘religious pareidolia’, definable as the psychological phenomenon of perceiving religiously construed agents and patterns where none exist. Numerous so-called apparitions and theophanies are reported annually around the globe and across religious traditions. Consider these well-known cases:

- Just before Christmas in 1996, a pattern of rainbow-colored swirls formed on a panel of windows at a finance building in Clearwater, Florida. To many, the swirls appeared to resemble the outline of the Virgin Mary. As word spread, an estimated one million people traveled to the site bearing offerings, transforming the parking lot into a shrine, and seeking cures for ailments.
- In 1998, a concrete traffic barricade placed in San Francisco’s Golden Gate Park by a city worker made headlines when it was found that the phallic-shaped pillar had become a major site of worship for Hindus. Recognizing the pillar as a *swayambhu*, or ‘self-manifested’ image of the god Shiva, local Indian nationals and Hindu devotees from around the world have visited the park to adorn the barricade cum *lingam* with flowers, bathe it with milk and honey, sing *bhajans*, and perform *pujas*.
- After the World Trade Center was struck by jetliners on September 11, 2001, numerous television viewers were convinced they saw the face of Satan, complete with horns and a malevolent grin, emerge from the clouds of billowing smoke. Captured in still frames and rapidly disseminated via social and mainstream media, the images fueled theological commentary on the terrorist attack.
- In April 2005, a salt stain on the wall of the I-94 underpass at Fullerton Avenue in the City of Chicago struck pedestrians with its resemblance to the Madonna, her face shrouded by a shadowy cloak. Flocks of the faithful as well as curious onlookers soon arrived to pay tribute with gifts of candles and flowers.
- In September 2007, residents of Hong Kayh, a housing district in Jurong, Singapore, noticed that a callus formation on a particular African mahogany tree looked like a monkey. Following reports of the phenomenon in local newspapers, hundreds of people from all over Singapore arrived at the site to pray, pay homage to the Chinese monkey god Sun Wukong, and tap into the tree’s magical properties.
- The American television series *Ghost Adventures* premiered on the Travel Channel in 2008. Armed with high-tech cameras and recording devices, crewmembers stage visits to famous haunted sites and reportedly capture paranormal activity and ghostly presences in shifting light patterns, dust motes, and random noise. Awards and strong ratings have earned the show a seventh season.
- In 2012, a man in Albuquerque, New Mexico, sat down to eat a tortilla his mother had baked for Ash Wednesday when he noticed a burn pattern that bore a striking resemblance to the face of Jesus. The flattened bread, now commonly referenced as ‘a sign’ and ‘a miracle’, has become a social media sensation.

The preceding examples highlight two pertinent points about the obstinate operation of the agency detection device and its consequential role in our interpretations of the world. First, both

natural and religious forms of pareidolia are the result of the same perceptual bias. Whether seeing the Man in the Moon or the Madonna on a grilled cheese sandwich, the same mental mechanism is at work. Second, the question of veracity is not relevant in this context. Brains were not designed to work as ‘truth machines’. Natural selection designed mental modules to piece together a model of the physical world that ‘works’ – does the model make us act appropriately and survive for another day? It does not matter whether this model is actually true. Our minds find agents everywhere, and the attribution of agency underpins many of our beliefs and subsequent behaviors. Clearly, religious thinking capitalizes on this in-built system. Ironically, while natural forms of pareidolia are recognized to be nothing more than charming illusions, many people accept religious forms as genuine events of perception.

More intricate but functionally related to agency detection is the mentalizing ability referred to as theory of mind. Because agents are so consequential – they can be cooperative and competitive, friendly and deadly – it is not enough to simply *see* them; they need also to be *understood*. For humans, the quintessential gregarious species, this need particularly extends to those agents that matter most: fellow persons. We require a way to explain and predict the actions of others, and the best way to do this is to assume, in Daniel Dennett’s (1987) phrase, an ‘intentional stance’; that is, to consider that beings think. Toward this end, nature fitted the brain with cognitive mechanisms that regularly generate mentalistic interpretations of the world. Theory of mind, the underlying algorithm of this machinery, entails the working assumption that agents act on the basis of intentions, beliefs, and desires.

Like agency detection, theory of mind is absolutely crucial to daily life. Unlike agency detection, theory of mind is expressed, at least to such a profound degree, only in our species. Indeed, it is reasonable to place theory of mind alongside symbolic thought, language, and abstract reasoning as the most human of human faculties. A robust theory of mind allows for unprecedented engagement with the world. Attributing mental states to others is the best way to make sense of behaviors, ascribe motivations, foresee goals, and anticipate the outcome of personal interactions. The truncated nature of life without a properly functioning theory of mind is illustrated by the ‘mindblindness’ symptomatic of autism spectrum disorders (Baron-Cohen 1995).

The running occupation of theory of mind is ‘mindreading’, a term that aptly characterizes our astounding ability to discern the beliefs and intentions of others (Malle and Hodges 2005). All normal humans are adept mind readers. We naturally assume that people have minds and we invest a great deal of time in trying to divine their thoughts. *Does he really mean what he said? Why did she do that? What is he thinking right now? Does she know I lied?* This sort of mental analysis is the foundation of interpersonal relations, allowing us to successfully negotiate the social networks on which human life depends. Interestingly, most of the cues used to read minds are physical rather than linguistic. Words alone can easily deceive; emotions and body language are much harder to fake. When we interact with others, we constantly monitor their reactions, glean information about their mental states from their eyes, facial expressions, and gestures. Despite the hidden nature of mental activity, our assessments are remarkably accurate. We have little difficulty inferring the thinking behind most of the behaviors we witness around us.

As a fundamental system of cognition, theory of mind is quick, automatic, and spans both conscious and nonconscious thought. While the neurological substrate supporting theory of mind is prewired, this complicated mental skill requires a period of maturation to reach its full potential, progressing from infant imitation to pretend play to a grasp of false beliefs around the age of four (Wellman 1992). From this point, individuals possess the sophisticated social reasoning necessary to navigate the Machiavellian challenges of group living. Telling truth from

deceit, identifying allies and antagonists, sharing and manipulating gossip – theory of mind underlies the political games that people play.

So the big human brain – big, according to Robin Dunbar (1996), precisely because of the social intelligence demanded by intense group living – operates on the overarching assumption that events in the world, like agents themselves, are caused by intentions, beliefs, and desires; that is, by minds. Consequentially, as with the task of agency detection, theory of mind necessarily displays a functional peculiarity. For the same reason that agency detection is hyperactive – it is too important to be left to a slower, more deliberative processing path – theory of mind is prone to promiscuous expression. Perceiving others and the environment in mentalistic terms predisposes us to another manifestation of pareidolia: the presumption of minds at work where none are in fact present. The misattribution of mind is easily extended to objects, imagined agents, and random events.

Everyday examples of mentalistic misattribution are close to hand. We naturally ascribe minds to things that act like agents, such as robots, misbehaving computers, and ventriloquist dolls. Interestingly, this bias can be co-opted for therapeutic effect, as demonstrated by the use of mechanical animals with dementia patients (Harmon 2010). Mind is also frequently employed to animate notions of chance, fortune, and fate, resulting in both folk and official beliefs in real, controlling agents. This form of thinking is visibly expressed in eccentric behaviors, including the use of amulets and ritualized activities common to superstitions, phobias, sports, and gambling. The driving assumption of intentionality is even apparent in our propensity to personalize and often personify otherwise random events. We query the meanings of arbitrary accidents, question the purposes of sickness and disease, and intuit meanings behind pointless calamities. Conversely, we readily suspect that an intentional will is linked to fortuitous occasions, such as disasters nearly missed, illnesses overcome, and lotteries won.

Once again, it is a small step from the mundane to the mystical. Understanding the operation of theory of mind gets some important work done with respect to religious thinking. Like agency detection, theory of mind is essential to the creation of religion. Consider these examples:

- *Teleological reasoning* – A general element of religion is that final causes, design, and ends are inherent to reality, however defined. Our mentalistic interpretation of the world, intuitive and already promiscuously at work in the minds of children (Kelemen 2004), logically suggests that, like human actions and pocket watches, things and events in the environment have intentional form and purpose, resulting in varieties of theistic and magical thinking.
- *Intelligent design* – For the same reason, myths about the origins of the cosmos and all life within it are universal and tenacious. Our inexorable intentional stance suggests that an eyeball or a flagellum, let alone a striking woman or a spiral galaxy, are too complex to have come about by impersonal means. Creation by hand and intent intuitively feels right, making ‘mindless’ processes like natural selection difficult to accept.
- *Supernatural agents* – The notion that there are creating, concerned, and controlling minds behind the visible curtain of reality leads to the need, at least metaphorically, to give flesh to these minds. Deities, devils, spirits, and so on are the theological outcome of the intuitive belief in unseen intentionality.
- *Body/soul dualism* – The natural interpretation of mind as the animating principle of agents, and especially the subjective experience of our own minds, has resulted in the ancient and persistent understanding of persons as physical bodies possessed of immaterial souls.
- *Afterlife* – Dualist thinking, the difficulty of imagining subjective nonbeing, and the ease with which we allow for unseen mentation, results in the idea that minds can endure beyond death. While the dissolution of the physical body is easily grasped and accepted, it is harder

to negate the disembodied continuance of mental life – a tendency that Jesse Bering (2006) demonstrates is already fully active in young children – hence the various forms of afterlife conceived by religions.

- *Prayer* – Ubiquitous across religious traditions, the practice of prayer presupposes a subject of address. Regardless of the form or intent of prayer, the practice requires acceptance of an exterior mind that is both receptive and responsive.
- *Worship* – Likewise, the bulk of religious practices, which can be largely characterized as worship – ritualized expressions of devotion, adoration, awe, and praise – are predicated on the notion that the focus of this activity – god, spirit, ancestor, and so on – is ‘aware’ of the presence and purpose of the action. Most of the behaviors that comprise religion make little sense apart from the assumption of an unseen mind that thinks, knows, and cares.

Cognitive constraints on religious thought

Clearly, knowledge of mental function begins to render the supernatural as natural. Just considering the functionality of agency detection and theory of mind – two basic cognitive processes common to all normal brains – goes some distance to explaining the origins and persistence of religious thinking, as well as how the suite of mental mechanisms we use for making sense of everyday life are co-opted to conceive of a whole range of religious notions about spiritual agents and dimensions. But as noted in the introduction, the cognitive approach also helps explain the shared features of religion and the forms that religious systems take.

Returning to the factory of the mind, we find that in addition to mental mechanisms responsible for agency detection and theory of mind – the latter primarily specialized for life in the social domain – there is a consortium of complicated machinery designed for apprehending the world at large. Pascal Boyer (2000, 2001) has produced a fruitful model of how this machinery operates. Utilizing innate taxonomical templates that coincide with the evolutionary environment, the brain classifies things according to natural categories: *person*, *animal*, *plant*, and *object*. Mental inference systems then automatically enrich thinking with native expectations of what members of each category are like. We tacitly understand, for instance, that stones are inanimate, that trees are rooted in place, that lions feed, and that our neighbors possess psychological properties.

Importantly, the set of cognitive mechanisms used to *apprehend* the world is also at work when we *construct* concepts about it. The process of building mental representations of things believed to exist in the world relies on the same taxonomical templates and inference systems. This is true regardless of the use or creativity of the concept conceived. Taking the idea of a ‘horse’ as an example, the basic *animal* template and inferences apply whether the horse in mind is a familiar one (say, the American Quarter Horse), one never personally encountered (say, the Przewalski’s horse), or one wholly imaginative (say, a unicorn). Whether normal or novel, the products of conceptualization are both limited and constrained by the mental tools the brain has to organize and interpret the world.

This process of mental representation is also strikingly visible in religious thought. Consider the concepts of ‘god’, ‘goddess’, ‘spirit’, or the other supernatural beings that are central to religious belief and practice. The concept ‘god’ is decidedly different from the concept of ‘stone’ or ‘tree’ or ‘horse’; nevertheless, each of these concepts is constructed using the same set of mental templates and inference systems. Gods are at bottom *person* concepts. *Person* is the only category that the mind possesses for comprehending the type of entities that gods are said to be. Because the conceptual blueprint for building a god is based on the template for *person*, cognitive inference systems activate the set of native expectations about what a *person* is like.

Gods think, feel, care, and act. Consequently, people represent gods in relational terms and interact with them in *person*-al ways.

Comparative religion confirms on the ground what cognitive psychology finds in the laboratory. From culture to culture and religion to religion, supernatural beings are consistently represented and described using *person* terms. There is theological diversity from place to place, but the bottom-up view provided by the cognitive approach reveals how shallow such diversity truly is. God concepts start with the *person* template, much like a wire mannequin, and this basic framework is then dressed up according to local preference. We conceive of supernatural beings anthropomorphically, be they the spirits encountered by shamans, the ancestors lingering at the edge of a hunter-gatherer village, the personified powers of Indic religion, or Christianity's omniscient creator. And this act of anthropomorphism is not confined to image – which many would argue is simply a metaphorical necessity – but extends to supernatural beings' motivations and behaviors. What Emma Cohen (2007: 107) says about the gods populating contemporary Afro-Brazilian religion is by and large universal: 'The gods [in these cult communities] display very humanlike demeanours in their social dealings with one another, acting on the basis of their desires and whims. Jealousy, vengeance, bad blood, and trickery colour the conniving between the characters of this Elysian soap opera'. There is good evidence that we not only make god in our own image physically but mentally as well. According to experimental work led by Nicholas Epley (2009), people of faith think, at least when it comes to controversial moral issues, that god believes as they do – a finding redoubled by an fMRI study showing how individuals map god's beliefs onto their own.

Viewed in this light, religious behaviors and ritual practices are no more mysterious than the act of shaking hands with a friend or buying a wedding gift. The machinery of social cognition that evolved to help us negotiate competitive/cooperative interpersonal relationships also guides our relations with supernatural beings. We take oaths, make vows, and enter into covenants. We offer sacrifices and give tithes. We praise, entreat, and confide. We utter prayers and keep commandments. We bow our heads, bend our knees, prostrate our bodies, and avert our eyes. We do acts of dedication, acts of confession, and acts of contrition. In exchange, we hope for a bit of reciprocal blessing, concern, comfort, peace, and protection. At every turn, religious practice pirates the social adaptations humans use to interact with each other.

Of course, gods and other supernatural beings are not *merely* persons. Gods, after all, are gods. They possess special qualities, attributes, and abilities that, relative to the natural expectations we have about *persons*, are counterintuitive. Gods can be omnipresent and omnipotent, immutable and eternal, immanent and aloof, gracious and retributive, and much more besides. Counterintuitive characteristics add to the noteworthiness of these concepts, which in turn gives them an advantage in the busy marketplace of ideas (Boyer and Ramble 2001). But the cognitive approach reveals that the counterintuitive characteristics that really matter to people are those that directly impinge on our personal lives. Gods observe events in our world, care about our moral actions, and, unlike fallible mortals, have open access to our hearts and minds (Pysiäinen 2009). Gods know information we strive to keep private. To minds predominantly designed for social life, such concepts are especially engaging. If such beings are out there, they are surely worth consideration and, for many, deep commitment. God concepts are pervasive and persuasive because they capitalize on the brain's most powerful system: social cognition. Gods are particularly salient because their conceptual structure makes them highly relevant to minds like ours.

So cognitive mechanisms directly shape our thinking about the nature of supernatural beings. More broadly, these cognitive mechanisms also dictate the boundaries of theological reflection and the development of religion systems. Like water channeled by surface slope and contour,

religious thinking is constrained by the cognitive landscape of the mind (Atran 2002; Tremlin 2005; Whitehouse 2004). Because religious concepts are constructed in the factory of the brain, the mental machinery that builds them necessarily limits their variety and usefulness. Regardless of theological tradition, supernatural beings conform to the native expectations people hold about all intentional beings. Christians, Jews, Hindus, and atheists use strikingly similar concepts of gods (Barrett 1998). Theologians cannot propose just any notion and expect it to work. If they are to be meaningful and relevant, supernatural beings must fit within the framework of social cognition, which provokes the relational and emotional responses that drive religious experience. In spite of the profundity of theologians and the sublime abstractions they are capable of conceiving – god as ‘ground of being’, nirguṇa Brahman, the state of neither perception nor non-perception – ordinary believers display an acute ‘theological incorrectness’, precisely because they hold in mind concepts that are rather more concrete (Barrett 1999; Slone 2004). Indeed, the propensity to think of deities as persons gives rise to our readiness to render persons as deities, as with the worship of ancestors, the making of saints, the elevation of religious founders, and the belief in contemporary incarnations of the divine.

The ongoing tension between the cognitive (mental mechanics) and cultural (theological) foundations of religion helps to unwind another conundrum. Scholars who study religion on the ground have long noticed that it frequently takes two contrasting forms. There is ‘official’ religion – which is based on texts and the teachings of specialists – and there is ‘folk’ or ‘popular’ religion – which is what real people in the real world think and do. Despite attempts to get people to think according to official concepts, they often ignore or distort doctrine. Insight into the nature of cognition suggests that the mental mechanisms that guide thinking actually work against certain aspects of official religion. Only concepts that closely fit the way minds operate have a chance of becoming meaningful and widespread. In this way, culture is channeled by cognition. We should expect, for example, that when religious systems feature god concepts that are too far removed from natural cognition, they will likely be pulled back in the opposite direction. Historical instances might include the development of Sufism, the rise of Pentecostalism, the preference for provincial Hindu deities, the popularity of Pure Lands over paranirvana, and the advent of living buddhas and bodhisattva, despite early teachings about Siddhartha Gautama.

Conclusion: cognitive science and the nature of religion

To understand human nature, including the things we think and do, we must look at our prehistory. ‘It was during this time’, Steven Mithen (1996: 7) points out, ‘that the distinguishing features of the human mind arose’. Similarly, to understand the origin, function, content, and history of religion, we must apprehend the deeper roots of the human mind. The cognitive approach pursues this line of investigation, offering an incisive account of the natural foundations of religion. Succinctly put, religion is dependent on perceptual, emotional, and cognitive scaffolding erected by natural selection to help our ancestors meet recurrent challenges in the human niche. Chiefly, the social psychology that orchestrates our thinking and behavior in the real world also guides our thinking about imagined ones. Due to mental mechanisms adaptively designed to interpret the natural world and other people, humans possess a powerful set of cognitive endowments that make their minds susceptible to producing supernatural concepts and, as a consequence, religion itself.

Researchers in cognitive and evolutionary psychology refer to such epiphenomena as ‘byproducts’. Byproducts, sometimes also referred to as ‘spandrels’, are behavioral, physiological, or psychological traits that have not been specifically selected but arise as side effects of traits

adapted for other purposes. A trait can evolve for one reason and then be employed for another. With respect to religion, we have the kinds of minds for which religious thinking comes naturally. Religion has flourished to the extent that it capitalizes on evolved tendencies basic to everyday human life. Religion, therefore, originated for the same reason that it persists: the mental mechanisms that support religious thinking are hardwired into the brain. As David Whitley (2009: 207) recognizes, ‘we are all born with these [mental mechanisms], whether we are individually religious or not’. Religion resides in the modern human mind – an elaborate byproduct of evolutionary adapted, socially oriented, symbolically thinking brains reflecting on the world in novel ways (Tremblin 2012).

From a cognitive perspective, then, religion is neither the result of some spiritual ‘big bang’ in the history of human development nor an evolutionary adaptation, as is often argued, but an accidental byproduct of the way the brain was designed to think. Religion is an enticing error, the outcome of a brain prone to make perceptual mistakes. Evolution has molded the human mind with powerful cognitive biases and predispositions, which, when employed in the natural environment, provide an effective means of survival. However, these same tightly strung biases and predispositions also produce false perceptions and cognitive blunders that are the wellspring of superstitious, magical, and religious thinking (Davis 2009; Shermer 2011; Subbotsky 2010). In this sense, religion can be viewed either as a ‘dangerous delusion’ (Dawkins 2006a) or a ‘seductive illusion’ (Bering 2011), depending on one’s mood.

Empirical investigation of this fascinating set of ideas and behaviors has arrived at a set of scintillating conclusions. First, religion is a purely natural phenomenon, generated and mediated by the brain. Religion is a byproduct of mental devices originally designed to serve other adaptive functions, primarily social cognition. Second, religion takes the universal forms it does because it is shaped by shared cognitive processes. By virtue of a common evolutionary history, people everywhere possess the same mental architecture and as a result think in predictable ways. Third, religion retains its place in the modern world because humans have a hardwired susceptibility to religious notions, which keeps them pervasive across time and place. A suite of powerful mental propensities makes it extraordinarily difficult to consistently render the world in wholly materialistic terms. Immerse this hardwiring in the sea of socialization in which we all swim, and religious thinking, as we see, is nearly irresistible.

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RELIGION AND SCIENCE¹

Sahotra Sarkar

Introduction

This chapter concerns four topics: (1) the origins of religion in human culture, viewed as a scientific problem; (2) the relations between religious beliefs and ideologies and modern science; (3) the relations between institutionalized religion and modern scientific practice; and (4) the role of naturalism in modern science. Each of these topics will occupy one of the following sections (in the indicated order), followed by some final remarks.

Though much has recently been written about the first of these topics, we will see that there is little yet that goes beyond speculation. With respect to the etiology of religion, the discussion here will be limited to what has become the Standard Model (SM)² for the evolution of religion. Though the conclusions here will be critical, some recent objections to the SM (Powell and Clarke 2012) will also be criticized. The focus will be on adaptationism which I will question. With respect to the second topic, ‘ideology’ is not being used pejoratively: rather it is being taken to designate an over-arching view of the world that has a normative component. The third topic turns to the institutions that control and propagate religion and how these institutional practices impinge upon scientific practice. Much of what has been written on both of the last two topics, especially the latter, has typically been polemical – perhaps sometimes deservedly so because they have intruded on some of the most important political issues of the day. The attitude here will be cautious and sceptical, with more concern for the subtleties and ambiguities involved than for settling the disputed questions.

The methodology of this chapter will consist of the type of conceptual analysis and inference that the sciences typically find acceptable – thus this chapter is an exercise of a certain form of naturalism. The complex relations between naturalism, religion, and science will occupy the penultimate section. The final section summarizes the major conclusions.

Though this chapter is about religion and science, I will make no attempt to define either term fully. That ‘religion’ is difficult to define should not come as news. Avoiding any attempt at definition, the second section will use two cultural traits (by which I mean beliefs or practices) to identify religious behaviour. While these criteria will thus be regarded as jointly (almost) sufficient to characterize religion, neither is being touted as individually necessary. Subsequent sections will take religion to be roughly what is regarded as such in the Judeo-Christian-Islamic (JCI) traditions since these have been the locus of most of the philosophical

discussions of the relations between religion and science. This choice will remain vulnerable to the objection that it ignores the religious proclivities of a large segment of the human population (in particular, the Hindus and Buddhists who are jointly not insignificant in number). However, these other traditions seem to have been largely relatively neutral about the relations between religion and science, usually embracing some form of implicit compatibilism,³ and thus not providing much motivation for demands for conceptual analysis. They may thus be less philosophically problematic in this context – but this assessment may only reflect my own limited competence.

Meanwhile, attempts to define ‘science’ fall afoul of well-known problems connected with the formulation of a criterion of demarcation between science and non-science (Nickles 2006). Some philosophers have invoked such a criterion in the context of explicating the relations between religion and science, for instance, in disputes over creationism in the United States.⁴ Others have rejected such a distinction in the same context and argued that it cannot be epistemologically credibly deployed in these arguments (Laudan 2003; Sarkar 2007a, 2011b). It will suffice here to presume a common-sense descriptive (rather than normative) characterization of science – one that assumes that there is consensus in scientific practice about what constitutes permissible methodologies for observation, experiment, and inference. Each of the sections below will elaborate on these methodologies as the discussion progresses with no claim towards providing a precise characterization of what constitutes science.

Whence religion?

A Martian ethologist exploring Earth would almost immediately conclude that human beings, like ants, are social animals – and everything that is currently known (by us) about human psychological development would support the Martian’s inference. The Martian would also note that most human groups indulge in some structurally uniform behavioural patterns that do not seem to produce any scrutable immediate benefits, namely ritual behaviours (Winkelman 2000; McClenon 2002). Finally, perhaps with a little less confidence, the Martian would observe that a large segment, but not all members,⁵ of most human groups accept the existence and authority of minimally counterintuitive agents that breach ordinary experience, for example, a talking burning bush, a man who walks on water, or one who descends down a ladder from an empty sky.

The last two Martian observations form the core of what I will use here as characterizing religious behaviour (or, in short, ‘religion’) in need of scientific explanation. During the last decade much has been written on the topic. This is not to suggest that much has been understood. The task of this section is to take a critical look at the state of the art, though the treatment will not be comprehensive. But before we begin, I will note three points:

1. I will take for granted, without further argument, the universality of the two Martian observations that are supposed to constitute the core of religion. Whether or not there is complete universality does not matter for the sake of the arguments developed in this chapter. Even if religion is empirically found to exist only in a significant majority of human groups (as it surely must be), that fact calls out for attempts at scientific explanation.
2. At least since the first publication of Frazer’s *Golden Bough* (1890), we have also been aware of the diversity of religious superstructures; since James’ (1902) *Varieties of Religious Experience*, we have similarly been aware of psychological differences subsumed under religion. These will be ignored here for a very good reason: not even the most ardent advocates of a science of religion can credibly claim that, at present, we have any hope of success in scientifically explaining religious diversity.

3. No normative claim is implicit in this characterization of religion, in the sense that no position is being taken on whether religious behaviour is ethically desirable or, equally, ethically undesirable.

The discussion below, by and large, will be couched in terms of religious belief purely for expository convenience. The arguments are supposed to apply equally to religious behaviour.

Moreover, in what follows, it will be assumed that religion must be scientifically explained – if, indeed, it can be so explained – without assuming veridicality for the relevant counterintuitive agent(s). Now, it is possible to argue that highly theoretical entities of science (quantum fields, carrying capacities of environments, etc.) also breach *ordinary* experience as much as these agents, but are nevertheless presumed to exist for the sake of producing scientific explanations. However, a response that should suffice here will be to view indirect experimental evidence as being in continuity with ordinary experience: such indirect evidence supports the existence of theoretical entities such as quantum fields or carrying capacities of environments. In contrast, no scientific evidence points to the existence of the counterintuitive agents posited by religion. To put the matter just a little differently: postulating the existence of gods is not the appropriate path towards a scientific explanation of why there is religion – or so I will assume.

Rather, religious traits will be treated as cultural traits like all others. In explaining the etiology of traits, Mayr (1961) notoriously distinguished between proximate and ultimate explanations. The former are supposed to encompass the mechanisms through which the trait is produced – that is, its *ontogenesis* (to deploy a biological term). The latter are supposed to show why the trait is there, that is, why it is present as it is, instead of some alternative which also may be ‘proximately possible’. While this distinction often seems compelling, especially in biological contexts, it is important not to overestimate its significance: in many cases, once the proximate origins of an entity are known, there is either no felt need for an ultimate answer or any further attempt at an ultimate answer seems uninteresting. A proximate explanation of Old Faithful (say, one that explains its regularity and, better, why that regularity seems to be in gradual decline) requires no further ultimate reckoning. Nor does the occurrence of sunspots.

Ultimate explanations are typically found interesting only when proximate explanations seem to leave some interesting feature indeterminate. In the evolutionary context, this indeterminacy typically arises because proximate factors initially invoked often allow for – that is, are consistent with – a large variety of structures and behaviours, only a few of which are realized. What can fill this gap? There are two types of potential mechanisms: (i) external factors, e.g., ecological (or viability-based) natural selection or sampling fluctuations (that is, drift; see Sarkar 2011a); and (ii) internal factors, such as architectural rules (Gould and Lewontin 1979) or developmental biases (Garson *et al.* 2003), both of which – very unfortunately – tend to get called ‘constraints’ as if they are not mechanisms in their own right (see, e.g., Powell and Clarke 2012). Even more importantly, if we retain and deploy the proximate–ultimate distinction, these internal factors may also be proximate – in other words, the class of proximate explanatory factors initially assumed must be expanded. But there is no need for any further ultimate explanation.

Let us return to religion. Much work during the last decade has seen potential proximate and ultimate explanatory factors explicitly distinguished and extensively studied. The former are treated in some detail in this volume (in Chapter 29) and I will confine myself to a few remarks using a framework that distinguishes four kinds of relevant mechanisms (Norenzayan and Gervais 2013). All of these mechanisms can be studied at both the neurobiological and the cognitive level and there is no *prima facie* reason to exclude either. The framework discussed in the next few paragraphs was selected because of its pertinence to what is said later about ultimate explanations. Too little is known at present to indicate how robust this framework is, that is,

whether these factors and their classification will survive future scrutiny (and, if so, to what extent) – consequently, the entire discussion here must be regarded as exploratory and, in that sense, speculative.

Though much of the focus of ultimate explanation has been on the mechanisms responsible for religious belief (rather than *non-belief*), I focus here on what is known about the mechanisms of non-belief since, as we shall see below, these may then be used to assay the plausibility of the posited ultimate factors of belief. (Throughout the discussion, non-belief will be taken to subsume disbelief.) What also interests me is that the evidence at hand suggests that the same constellation of mechanisms is responsible for both belief and non-belief: these mechanisms include cognitive, motivational, and cultural learning processes (Harris *et al.* 2009). Four types of mechanism have been identified and distinguished as sources of non-belief (Norenzayan and Gervais 2013): 1. Low levels of mentalizing (e.g., attributing mental states to others) is correlated with, and seems to be a mechanism for, non-belief; 2. Security and predictability of living situations generates non-belief; 3. Religious non-belief can arise because individuals are not culturally taught to have religious belief; 4. Most interestingly, non-belief is associated with analytic thinking; moreover, analytic thinking may provide a mechanism for non-belief – this has been strongly suggested by experimental inductions that activate analytic processing, including perceptual disfluency, incidental visual exposure to an image of thinking, implicit priming of analytic thinking concepts, and recalling a past decision to promote analytically-thinking non-belief (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012). While these are all ‘higher-level’ mechanisms in the sense that they are silent about their underlying neural counterparts, all that is known at present suggests that generating appropriate neural foundations will not in any way be problematic (Harris *et al.* 2009; Kapogiannis *et al.* 2009).

As noted earlier, there is an important symmetry insofar as each of these mechanisms can also be used to explain belief: for instance, high levels of mentalizing may explain a higher prevalence of religious beliefs in individuals. With that in mind, let us turn to ultimate explanations. As we begin, it will be worthwhile to note that these discussions of the etiology of religion mirror ‘soft’ discussions of evolution elsewhere, ‘soft’ in the sense that putatively scientific analyses remain entirely verbal with no attempt at quantitative model building even though mathematical reasoning has long been prevalent – if not dominant – in evolutionary biology (Sarkar 2004, 2007b). Moreover, whether it be the etiology of belief (Powell and Clarke 2012) or non-belief (Johnson 2012), the discussion has almost always transformed the question of why there is religious (non-)belief to what it is there *for*. This is an epistemologically questionable move because it presumes a commitment to a certain kind of adaptationism: even if religious belief is not itself an adaptation, *there is some relevant adaptation that explains the existence of religious belief*. The exact form of this characterization of adaptationism is important because it is broader than the more customary characterization which restricts the category to situations in which direct selection is supposed to explain a trait’s etiology (Gould and Lewontin 1979).

A recent analysis by Johnson (2012) is relatively unique insofar as the explicit focus is on non-belief rather than belief. Johnson asks: What are atheists for? He explicitly restricts attention to adaptive hypotheses without argument. The hypotheses he considers include: the use of mixed strategies in populations with some members displaying belief and others not – this may lead to frequency-dependent selection for non-belief; direct selection of atheism in some environments; reinforcement of belief through the existence of some non-believers, etc. Returning to belief, the Standard Model (SM) holds that religion is a by-product of selection of some cognitive feature.⁶ Folk evidence for such a view is relatively easy to come by if we already have adaptationist commitments: it is hard to see how much of religious beliefs or behaviour directly contributes to higher fitness (measured by expected number of offspring). If anything, given

religious traditions of self-denial and other-oriented activity, folk wisdom would suggest the very opposite. Most proponents of the SM see it as not being adaptationist because it does not hold that selection acts directly in favour of religious belief. However, it is adaptationist in the broad sense being used here insofar as it still envisions some role, however indirect, for selection.

Against the SM, Powell and Clarke (2012) have argued for direct selection for religious belief. They have noted an epistemological asymmetry that, at least on the surface, privileges a direct selection explanation. They observe that both SM explanations and direct selections explanation face a standard objection to adaptationism alluded to earlier: these ‘soft’ or verbal explanations often consist of ‘just so’ stories (Gould and Lewontin 1979) about how selection is supposed to favour a trait. In practice, these ‘just so’ stories, no matter how plausible, typically prove intractable from the perspective of empirical confirmation. Moreover, when one ‘just so’ story fails (on conceptual or empirical grounds), we have the option of inventing another – and part of the problem with adaptationism has been that these stories are remarkably easy to invent. (I know of no attempt to specify details of an ultimate explanation of religion that circumvents this problem.) Now, Powell and Clark claim, SM explanations face an additional problem that direct selection explanations do not: the former must also specify what selection does act on (for religious belief to be a by-product) whereas the latter do not (in the sense that they already presume selection acts on belief).

Unfortunately for Powell and Clark’s argument, the appeal of this epistemological asymmetry turns out to be transient: it disappears when we turn to detail, in this case to the proximate mechanisms for (non-)belief introduced earlier. This is where our focus on non-belief makes the argument easier. It is easy enough (in the sense of ‘just so’ stories) to invent explanations that putatively show how selection on each of those four families of mechanism (directly or non-directly) favours non-belief: 1. Given that most of the entities we encounter are not even sentient, selection favours conservatism in mentalism; 2. If security and predictability are correlated with non-belief, there should be selection on cognitive mechanisms that simultaneously increase security and predictability and, concomitantly, non-belief; 3. If the capacity for cultural training is selected for, non-belief has the same status as belief *ceteris paribus*; 4. It is highly plausible that the capacity for analytic thinking would be selected for since it is likely to be help survival in hostile environments (which very likely dominated early hominid evolution). Now, if an increase in this capacity generates non-belief (as the studies mentioned earlier suggested), we once again have selection that results in non-belief. So much for direct selection for belief. However, the arguments for the second and fourth sets of mechanism are quite strong (at this verbal level) and this has relevance for the SM: for that model to be correct, whatever type of selection favours belief must be strong enough to overcome this type of selection for non-belief.

There already are two morals to be drawn from the discussion so far: 1. Proximate mechanisms can be used to assay the plausibility of putative ultimate explanation and, when they can be so used, they should be so used; 2. This is hardly news, but it deserves continued emphasis that soft adaptationist stories are suspect. Both the SM and its critics who invoke direct selection rely on adaptationism to argue for religious belief. My purpose in focusing on non-belief in this section is intended to show the frailty of adaptationist thinking. Most importantly, none of the ‘just so’ stories on either side amount to more than speculation.

Finally, I wish to go one step further in expressing scepticism about adaptationism. The debates over evolutionary psychology in the last two decades have exposed how little is genuinely understood about the biological evolution of mental traits (Buller 2005). The intended contrast here is with cultural evolution (with no denial of the multifaceted interactions between biological and cultural factors). It may well be that credible accounts of the etiology of religion will require much more from theories of cultural change than what is incorporated into any of

the models discussed earlier in this section.⁷ It also may be the case that, once the proximate mechanisms of the etiology of religion are understood, there is no ultimate explanation required. Religious behaviour could be the result of neurological mechanisms – perhaps ones triggered by cultural input – with no selectionist story to be told at all. The point is that we do not know. For all the voluminous output about the evolution of religion in recent years, including much that is geared towards a popular audience (e.g., Dawkins 2006a and Dennett 2006), there is little about the evolution of religion that we do know.

Modern science and religion

This section and the next will be brief. Perhaps even more has been written about the relations between religion and modern science than about the evolutionary origins of religion. I will avoid simply repeating familiar platitudes and focus on sharpening the issues that are at stake in the disputes that have arisen. The emphasis will be on trying to achieve clarity on the issues that have been divisive. Let us begin with the most familiar of these platitudes, that there is a deep conflict between religion and science. A critical distinction is one between conceptual issues, regarding the relations between the conceptual frameworks of religion and science, on the one hand and issues of practice on the other, how individual scientists and scientific institutions interact with religious individuals and institutions (and, of course, *vice versa*). The former is, to put it roughly, a question of the relations between theology and science, the other concerns more sociological questions about the relations between organized religion and science. Unfortunately this distinction is often ignored, for instance by Draper (1874) and White (1876), two polemics that are often held to be responsible for the platitude that religion and science have perennially been in conflict (Harrison 2010). As we shall see, maintaining the distinction does much to sort out the issues that have proved divisive. This section will concern the conceptual issues; the next will take up practice.

In either context it will be important to classify different positions we may take about the relation of religion to science. Here I will distinguish incompatibilism, with conflict and replacement being (potentially non-disjoint) subcategories, and compatibilism, with independence and synergy being subcategories.⁸ The familiar platitude mentioned earlier, that of the deep conflict between religion and science, is a prime example of incompatibilism. Restricting religious claims to the normative domain of ethics, and viewing science as purely descriptive – as Gould (1999) suggested – provides a simple example of compatibilism (and, incidentally, trivially satisfies the requirement that religions include a normative perspective).

Much will depend on what we mean by ‘religion’ and ‘science’. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, ‘religion’ in the rest of this discussion will be taken to refer to beliefs and practices associated with the JCI traditions. For science, we face the demarcation problem. We also face the problem that the term ‘science’ as understood since the early twentieth century may not capture what was meant by that term in earlier centuries. The advent of relativistic physics and quantum mechanics led to metaphysical transformations that were at least as profound as the emergence of modern science itself in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Relativistic physics challenged ‘absolutist’ concepts of time, simultaneity, etc., that had been unquestioned by the physics of earlier eras. Quantum mechanics challenged fundamental notions of causality – or, at least, determinism. Both developments were revolutionary: they challenged physicists’ and philosophers’ complacency about the possibility of having a final scientific description of the world. They naturally led to the emergence of two (related) assumptions that became central to a ‘received view’ of science that are most relevant to the discussion here: (a) scientific truths are always fallible – the revolutions in physics did much to convince philosophers (and scientists)

that, *in principle*, no scientific claim is immune from future revision in the face of new data; and (b) it is plausible to hold an instrumentalist interpretation of scientific laws (and theoretical entities posited by laws). In fact, realism faces what are often taken to be insurmountable difficulties though this remains a matter of vigorous debate, depending on how 'realism' is construed.⁹

Now, let us make the case for the independence version of compatibilism. One option noted earlier is to restrict religion to the normative (ethical) realm and science to the descriptive one. But this is probably not a construal of religion that will satisfy anyone with even minimal theological aspirations. But we have another option that relies on the instrumentalist interpretation of science. *If* that is all there is to science, science does not concern absolute truth, or even truth.¹⁰ In contrast, religion is about truth. So, what happens in science is irrelevant to religion. The trouble with this argument is that the conclusion implies that religious beliefs make no substantive claims about the world of experience studied by science. But the price to be paid is that we must remain satisfied with a purely instrumentalist interpretation of science.

Modern physics may well support the stronger synergy version of compatibilism. For instance, the Big Bang cosmological model posits a beginning to time. We may, if we so choose, interpret Big Bang as the creation of the universe (Halvorson and Kragh 2011). Then there are a variety of fine tuning arguments based on numerical coincidences between fundamental physical constants that apparently must exist if we are to have life as we know it on Earth (Dickson 2012). Typically, fine tuning arguments are deployed to argue for the existence of a god – and found wanting in that respect (Sarkar 2011a). However, they may also be taken as providing synergy between religion and science, in the sense of establishing mutually supporting coherence and consistency, as Polkinghorne (1998) has argued. There appears to be no compelling argument against this weaker use of fine tuning arguments. There are several other such examples of modern science providing apparent synergy with religion.¹¹ But there remains a fundamental question: why bother at all with such theological interpretations of science? What do they provide that mundane philosophy of science does not? Any answer will probably have to invoke normative commitments of some sort, that is, some form of ideology.

The trouble also is that we can just as easily argue for incompatibilism. In the same way that we disposed of the purely normative interpretation of religion earlier without much comment, I will also dispose of what happens when the Old Testament is read literally – and the Book of Genesis taken to provide scientific models for the origin of the universe. Almost everything we know from geology and biology is incompatible with these models. Though so-called 'Young Earth creationists' continue to promote these views (see the discussion of naturalism below), these views should not intrude upon serious discussions of the relation between religion and science. The main problems here come from biology – and they are sufficient for some figures such as Wilson (1975) to suggest that science as an ideology¹² (that is, as something with normative implications) will replace religion as society progresses to a state more consilient with advanced scientific knowledge. At the very least, there is considerable scope for the conflict sub-category of incompatibilism. But all such claims depend on highly controversial interpretations about modern biology – about genetics on the one hand, and evolution on the other.

Problems arise because theological views based on JCI traditions seem to make deep claims about human nature – for instance, the original state of humans. Now, human nature has also long been a favourite domain of speculation (often presented as scientific fact) for biologists and philosophers committed to some form of biological reductionism (Sarkar 1998). Some urge miscellaneous degrees of genetic determinism, though that is becoming increasingly unfashionable; but to the extent that biological nature may constrain human behaviour, there is a challenge to any doctrine of free will. The compatibilist can respond by noting that genetic determinism seems to be in (probably terminal) decline. However, genetics is not all that there

is to biology. Genetic indeterminacy may be compatible with biological determinism – if our entire biological constitution (including whatever genes are relevant) determines our behaviour. There is no compelling evidence against this claim even though it is far from proven – so we may once again have to face the problem of free will.¹³ Those who are convinced of the universality of natural selection and competition as driving forces of human evolution (including Wilson 1978) may infer even more negative conclusions about human nature ('red in tooth and claw') and challenge normative theological assumptions about grace. But, once again, the interpretation of the science remains controversial – this includes the debates over evolutionary psychology mentioned earlier.

The only conclusion I wish to draw is the following: unless we are willing to be very precise as to what we take to be the relevant scientific claims, and how we epistemologically interpret the nature of scientific knowledge, and perhaps be even more precise about what we take to be the relevant religious claims, there is nothing determinate that we can conclude about the relations between religion and science at the conceptual level.

Scientific practice and institutionalized religion

We turn now to more sociological issues. Recall the platitude of religion being in terminal conflict with science that dominated discussions of the topic for much of the twentieth century. In spite of the discussion of the last section, it remains possible that there is warrant for this platitude when one considers the history and present (socio-political) status of the relations between religious institutions and their scientific counterparts. There is always the case of Galileo and the Catholic Church, though that episode continues to be reinterpreted in new ways (Heilbron 2012). Thanks to an array of historical studies in recent decades, it is well recognized that many of the claims of an alleged conflict between religion and science were engendered by polemics, especially after the 'classic' contributions of Draper (1874) and White (1876). As the pendulum has swung the other way, it seems to have become equally fashionable to posit compatibilism, or even synergy, also without sustained argument. But there is no simple pattern that can be endorsed at least until much more systematic historical exploration of the relevant issues has been completed (Harrison 2010).

However, it does not seem appropriate (to me) to invoke some sort of neutrality principle about this debate, one which would claim that nothing normatively salient should be concluded because there are examples on both sides: cases in which religion and science have been compatible (or there has even been synergy), and cases in which they have been incompatible or even been in conflict. One question we must confront is whether science should have some privileged institutional status in our epistemology. *If* we are willing to privilege science over other epistemological practices, then our 'neutral assumption' (or null model, to use a statistical metaphor) should be that other social structures should (by and large) be compatible with science and, preferably, synergistic with it. A sustained discussion of the tenability of the antecedent in this claim is beyond the scope of this chapter; the issues are not simple, and I am not going to urge that scientific research be independent of social scrutiny. Nevertheless, I will argue that science, institutionally, should have *some* privilege. My grounds are not purely technological, i.e., relating to the control over the non-human world that the sciences have enabled and which I will assume is desirable (Sarkar 2005, 2012) or pragmatic/ethical in the sense that this technology (e.g., modern medicine) has done much to enhance human well-being. Rather, crucial to my view are the intellectual contributions of modern science (Sarkar 2005): how much more of the universe we have come to understand since the emergence of modern science.

Given this assumption, I propose an asymmetry principle in viewing how religious institutions should engage science: cases of conflict deserve far more critical scrutiny than cases of compatibilism or synergy. This is why defences of religious institutions based on (credible) observations of routine and mundane compatibilism become suspect even though cases of conflict are typically much more complex than used to be recognized. There is perhaps only one easy case: modern creationism (Sarkar 2011a), which will be taken up in the next section. What deserves most critical scrutiny is any putative role played by religious institutions to foreclose scientific research. In some cases, this may have some *post hoc* justification, for example, if there are ethical reasons that should preclude certain investigations – we must always remember Nazi biology and medicine and the Tuskegee syphilis experiment. I am not arguing against the social control of science.

Nevertheless, there is some substance to the platitude that institutional restrictions impede science (and other modes of inquiry). Given that, issues raised by the Galileo affair remain salient in spite of all the recent reinterpretation designed to show it was not simply a case of religion impeding the progress of science (Harrison 2010; Stenmark 2010). I will restrict discussion to one contemporary case: the embryonic stem cell (ESC) research controversy which has been ongoing in the United States since 2001 when (then) President George W. Bush prohibited the use of federal funds for ESC research in spite of the alleged medical promise of the results (Broussard and Shanahan 2003).

Four points will be relevant here. First, I will take it for granted that there should be public debate about the ethics of ESC research – as there should be for any scientific research with implications for humans. Second, even though religious beliefs (of Bush and his supporters) clearly had some role in the prohibition, contrary to popular belief (see Callahan 2009), there was no consensus among religious institutions (within the JCI traditions) (Childress 2001). For instance, at that time, though the Catholic Church officially opposed ESC research, some Catholic theologians endorsed it. Moreover, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), which typically joins the Catholic Church in opposition to abortion, was neutral:

The proclaimed potential to provide cures or treatments for many serious diseases needs careful and continuing study by conscientious, qualified investigators. As with any emerging new technology, there are concerns that must be addressed. Scientific and religious viewpoints both demand that strict moral and ethical guidelines be followed.

(Childress 2001: 161)

This diversity of viewpoints is indicative of what should be obvious: religious institutions cannot be credibly treated as a monolith. Third, if all that is being claimed in the Latter-Day Saints' statement is that what a religious viewpoint demands is appropriate attention to ethical issues, the position is probably unexceptionable. Fourth, however, it matters whether the ethical criteria to be used are purely doctrinal rather than being established through normative reasoning acceptable to non-adherents to the relevant doctrine. If the choice is purely doctrinal, we finally have a clear conflict between institutionalized religion and scientific practice. In the case of ESC research, with very few exceptions (most notably, and perhaps expectedly, the Catholic Church), doctrinal presumptions *alone* were not explicitly used in attempts to adjudicate the debate even though, as others have noted, they were often implicitly invoked in the debate, which often got unduly heated (Callahan 2009). In fact, the heat of this debate is what calls for explanation – but this takes us into political territory, namely the role of religion in public life in general and that is beyond the scope of this chapter.

This discussion should have made it clear that even at the level of the relations between institutionalized religion and contemporary scientific practice, both the issues that are involved and the empirical situation are complex. An empirical question for which I have no confident answer is how common cases such as that of ESC research are – but they appear to be rare. Religious intervention into public life (and not restricted to science), especially successful intervention, is probably more common in the United States than in any other country of the global North. Yet, even if we accept the asymmetry principle for critical scrutiny, it may well be the case that such examples of conflict are rare enough that they should not be taken as indicative of ongoing major conflicts between religious institutions and scientific practice (at least today, if not for the entire historical record). The experiences in other countries seem not to have been studied in much detail, perhaps because, until the last few decades, much of scientific research has been confined to the North. Nevertheless there is little grist for the mill of the New Atheists (Beattie 2007) in their ongoing polemics about how institutionalized religion barricades the frontiers of science.

Naturalism

The many potential sources of discord between religion and science noted in the last two sections have led, especially in the United States, to a somewhat unique political confrontation, unique in the sense that part of the rhetoric of this confrontation has been about a philosophical issue, namely naturalism. In the United States, what is most often at stake in this confrontation is the science curriculum of publicly funded schools.¹⁴ A vocal religious minority there objects to the teaching of biological evolution because it is perceived to be at odds with their religious beliefs, typically arising from a literal reading of the Old Testament (what was earlier called ‘Young Earth creationism’). Some of these activists would replace discussions of evolution with creation stories or, if that proves to be pragmatically impossible, at least require that evolution and creationism be accorded equal time in classroom instruction. What makes it difficult to replace creationism for evolution in school curricula is that the U.S. Constitution mandates a separation of church and state, and courts have routinely interpreted the introduction of creation stories to be advocating religion rather than presenting a ‘creation science’ as is claimed by creationism’s proponents. This legal requirement also precludes equal time for evolution and ‘creation science’. That was the legal consensus in the 1980s with the scientific creationists suffering a bitter legal defeat in an Arkansas case that eventually progressed to the U.S. Supreme Court. In recent decades creationists have re-branded creationism as ‘Intelligent Design’ (ID) and have made some changes to their doctrines, including an abandonment of the assumption of a ‘young earth’ ($\leq 10,000$ years old). In the courts, so far, they have not fared any better than their predecessors (Sarkar 2007a). At present, the immediate future of the ID movement does not look promising.

What is interesting in our context is that ID’s proponents, especially its founding figures such as Johnson (e.g., 1995), view the battle against evolution as part of a broader war – against *naturalism*. From the ID perspective, science in recent decades (or, perhaps, centuries) has made an unnecessary commitment to naturalism by precluding ‘supernatural’ causes. Presumably, these supernatural causes are factors such as miracles or other forms of divine intervention in the world. For instance, such interventions supposedly include a boost of information into the biological realm that enabled the Cambrian explosion of animal diversity some 500 million years ago. It is unclear what criteria would make such an event – whether or not it occurred – supernatural. ID creationists have been remarkably vague about the specific contents of these causal mechanisms in spite of repeated taunts of their critics (Sarkar 2011b). The best interpretation of ID’s supernaturalism seems to be that certain events are immune to scientific

explanation if such explanation is restricted to the currently accepted methods of scientific observation, experiment, and inference. Adequate explanation will allegedly require the invocation of a designer not subject to scientific law (Johnson 1995). (Note, here, that we are not talking about normative claims of ethics, etc. – we are talking about the ‘mundane’ descriptive facts unearthed by normal science.)

If we accept this construal of supernaturalism, naturalism can be defined by what it precludes. Naturalism, then, consists of a denial of the permissibility of explanatory factors that are beyond scientific investigation – and critics of creationism have typically defended such a view (Ruse 2001; Sarkar 2007a). Now, suppose we restrict the domain of inquiry to the sciences (and not all forms of knowledge). Then this type of naturalism is called *methodological* (e.g., Ruse 2001). Abandoning it, as urged by Johnson, would require a reconstruction of scientific methodology. It is worth pondering on what that would mean.

Suppose we are presented with theoretical results or experimental data that current theories, and the entities and processes posited by them, cannot explain. An example from physics of such a theoretical result was Dirac’s (1928) relativistic wave equation that predicted a ‘hole’ in the energy spectrum.¹⁵ From the same period (the 1920s), an example of experimental problems is the apparent non-conservation of energy during beta decay. Employing standard scientific methodology, both problems were resolved in the 1930s by positing new particles, the positron in the former case and the neutrino in the latter. Two aspects of this resolution are important for us: (i) the existence of these new particles was experimentally confirmed – and this was universally viewed as a non-negotiable requirement for their acceptance; and (ii) the laws governing these particles were probabilistic.

Now, suppose that, when the problems mentioned earlier were first recognized, our ID theorist announced that the problems were manifestations of a designer (intelligent or otherwise) not subject to physical law. My problem is: *what is the sense in which this is a scientific explanation?* In fact, *what is the sense in which this is an explanation at all?* Perhaps the ID theorist will claim that these are not pertinent examples (especially because the relevant problems were rather quickly resolved). What is required is a situation in which there is no law-like explanation to be found at all; from the perspective of current scientific methodology, that is, of naturalism, the phenomena to be explained are ‘truly random’. There are two obvious responses to this move. First, the laws invoked in the examples of the positron and the neutrino are probabilistic – to that extent embracing randomness is standard fare in current scientific theory and methodology. Second, and more important, the locution ‘truly random’ is meaningless: to say that an event is random *meaningfully*, we must say more, we must say from what probability distribution it is drawn. We must specify a reference class and a rule that allows us to compute the probability of an event (compared to other members of the reference class). And once we have done that, we have invoked a law of sorts – and have opened up a new domain for scientific inquiry.

There is at least one other potential response available to an ID theorist or any other advocate of a strategy of using science to advocate religious claims beyond science: an invocation of religious claims to explain what is proving recalcitrant for existing science and, in that sense, apparently beyond the orbit of methodological naturalism. Indeed, this is the strategy some ID theorists such as Behe (1996) have deployed when they have marshalled putative inadequacies of current evolutionary theory in support of their claims. This is a version of what is called the god-of-the-gaps argument: saving for a god what current science cannot explain. However, as Drummond (1894) pointed out more than a century ago, it is a poor argument, theologically or otherwise. It will always be available – unless we have sciences that explain everything (and that, perhaps, is what would truly be a miracle). But, worse, in the face of recalcitrant

phenomena, it conflates intractability with impossibility – and to make a claim of the latter credible what we have to do is more science as we know it, that is, indulge in more methodological naturalism.¹⁶

These arguments are not intended to be polemical. Rather, they are supposed to suggest that methodological naturalism seems unimpeachable in scientific contexts and that some response to these arguments is required from its critics. Now, Johnson (1995) accepts most of these arguments but argues that methodological naturalism slides inexorably into *metaphysical* naturalism which embraces the additional claim that the entities and process identified using (standard) scientific methodology are *all* that there is. Another way of putting the same point is to claim that all of the universe (including, obviously, all aspects of human mind, culture, behaviour, etc.) is subject to scientific explanation. Now individual scientists (and philosophers) vary in their attitude to this issue, from embracing some strong version of the claim (e.g., Weinberg 1992), to denying it almost entirely (Sarkar 1998; Dupré 2003). The first important point is that scientific methodology requires no commitment with respect to that claim: that methodology provides norms for how we should acquire scientific knowledge, leaving open the question whether there are other epistemological norms. For instance, at present, there is no compelling reason to believe that scientific methodology alone suffices to explain ethical or aesthetic norms (even though this is an area of much ongoing research, some of which was mentioned in the second section). But, surely, this is not a sufficient reason to invoke supernatural intervention in the world. The last point takes us to a second important point that Johnson misses: even if there can be knowledge other than scientific knowledge, why must that other knowledge be religious?

These arguments depend quite critically on how naturalism was construed earlier, which was in the spirit of Nagel (1956), even though the construal given here was explicitly introduced as a denial of Johnson's (and other ID theorists') supernaturalism. There are three potential problems faced by this construal of naturalism. First, if naturalism is identified with scientific methodology, does it have any teeth? Why is it simply not some minimal form of empiricism which no one denies is appropriate as an interpretation of science? There are two responses: (1) Naturalism certainly does not consist of an empiricism that requires incorrigible sense-data as the foundation of knowledge. However, if empiricism is liberalized (as, for instance, by the later logical empiricists; see Sarkar 2013) to embrace ordinary-sized physical objects and their behaviour, and allow observation reports to be revisable, then naturalism is indistinguishable from this form of empiricism. It follows that, to the extent that this form of empiricism is uncontroversially appropriate for the interpretation of science, so is naturalism; (2) More importantly, naturalism shows its teeth insofar as it embraces the doctrine that the empirical facts of the world can be understood scientifically. Hume would be happy: there is no scope for miracles.

Second, does this construal definitionally preclude non-naturalistic science? This seems like a simple question, but is not. Since a 'yes' answer would probably be taken by critics of naturalism as grist for their mill, let us begin by wondering what a non-naturalistic science would be? One that admits miracles? Or perhaps something along the lines of Plantinga's (1996) 'Augustinian' science. In denying methodological naturalism, Plantinga urged Christian scientists to pursue 'Augustinian' or 'theistic' science. Such scientists are supposed to view the world against the background of a presumed conflict between the 'City of God' and the 'City of Man', to interpret all intellectual life as episodes of this conflict, opt for those activities that are consistent with citizenship in *Civitas Dei*, and use categories such as original sin in the construction of the social sciences. McMullin (2001: 167) had the apt response:

I do not think ... that [Plantinga's] theistic science should be described as science. It lacks the universality of science, as that term has been understood in the Western

tradition.¹⁷ It also lacks the sort of warrant that has gradually come to characterize natural science, one that points to systematic observation, generalization, and the testing of explanatory hypotheses. It appeals to a specifically Christian belief, one that lays no claim to assent from a Hindu or an agnostic. It requires faith, and faith (we are told) is a gift, a grace, from God. To use the term 'science' in this context seems dangerously misleading; it encourages expectations that cannot be fulfilled, in the interests of adopting a label generally regarded as honorific.

Perhaps no more need be said about non-naturalistic science until we are presented with an example of such that we can study in detail.

Third, some authors have construed naturalism in a very different way. For instance, Sober (2011: 200) takes naturalism to require that numbers exist in space and time (whatever that is supposed to mean). He argues that mathematical evolutionary theory entails that numbers exist and, assuming that they do not exist in space and time, concludes that evolutionary theory provides reason not to endorse naturalism. Part of Sober's purpose is to disentangle the dispute between creationists and scientists from that between supernaturalists and naturalists and to argue that the correctness of evolutionary theory is not relevant to the latter. As such, this view is almost diametrically opposed to the one endorsed in this section – but at the expense of construing naturalism in a way that is tangential to the construal relevant to understanding what most creationists and most of their opponents explicitly believe to be at stake. This is not to suggest that Sober's construal is entirely idiosyncratic – Papineau (1993) and Maddy (1997) provide evidence to the contrary. But it is not a construal that helps explore the variegated relations between religion and science.

Final remarks

Where does this leave us?

First, the discussion of the etiology of religion should leave us wary of any claim about why humans have religion that is not accompanied by adequate disclaimers about what we really know, and with explicit attempts to keep speculation separate from what is reasoned scientific inference. In particular the facile adaptationism that is all too common in discussions of human mental and cultural traits should be resisted. It may even be the case that there is nothing that religious belief (or non-belief) is for – nothing of interest beyond the proximate mechanisms.

Second, a wide range of possibilities are available to characterize the relations between religion and science, ranging from synergy at one extreme, and conflict and replacement at the other. At the conceptual level, which of these possibilities is most appropriate depends critically on what religion is supposed to consist of, which science is in play, and how the nature of science is construed. The ambiguities are more pervasive for interpretations of religion than for science if we accept the 'received view' of science inherited from the twentieth century. While these ambiguities are less problematic when we turn to the relations between institutionalized religion and scientific practice, the relevant issues there are also complex. Once we are careful in clarifying what the disputes are about, the loci of conflict seem highly circumscribed at present. Moreover, even if we accept an asymmetry principle that privileges science over other epistemological endeavours, which in turn requires that cases of conflict deserve more attention than mundane cases of compatibilism, actual disputes that truly are between religion and science may be rare. This is an empirical issue that can only be settled through systematic exploration of potential cases. Nevertheless, much of the polemics about how institutionalized religion impedes scientific progress seem to be no more than that – polemics bereft of historical and sociological empirical support.

Third, the question of how religion and science relate to naturalism depends on the construal of naturalism on which there is no consensus. However, at least in the debate over creationism (particularly in the United States), both creationists and their critics agree that naturalism should be construed methodologically to reflect the practice of science, and especially to deny supernatural explanations such as the occurrence of miracles. If this construal is accepted, then several points become relatively clear: science required naturalism, religion typically demands more, and there is no clear chain of reasoning that shows how naturalism can be brought into question in empirical contexts. Whether any stronger conclusion should be drawn remains open to question.

Notes

- 1 For discussions over the years, thanks are due to Cory Juhl and John Stachel.
- 2 The terminology is that of Boyer (2005).
- 3 See the third section below for a characterization of what I mean by ‘compatibilism’ and related categories.
- 4 See, for instance, Ruse (1982) and Pennock’s testimony in *Kitzmiller vs. Dover* (2005) – for an analysis, see Sarkar (2011b).
- 5 Indeed, the number of non-believers (atheists) should not be understated; recent estimates suggest about a billion, exceeded only by Christians, Muslims, and Hindus, among their religious counterparts (Zuckerman 2007).
- 6 See, for example, Atran (2002), Barrett (2004), Boyer (2005), Kirkpatrick (2006), and Bloom (2009).
- 7 In this context see, e.g., Bellah (2011). These models of cultural evolution are being ignored here because it remains far from clear that they would be accepted as science by the majority of the scientific community.
- 8 Here, I am closer to Stenmark (2010) rather than the much better-known classification scheme of Barbour (1997, 2000). I do not follow Stenmark at all with respect to the best way to characterize Intelligent Design proponents.
- 9 For a defence of scientific realism, see Psillos (1999).
- 10 This argument basically goes back to Duhem (1954).
- 11 See Stenmark (2010) for an extended discussion.
- 12 Note that Wilson (1978) does not use this term.
- 13 There also is the problem of the potential inconsistency between microphysical (quantum) indeterminism and macrophysical (and biological?) determinism, but that is well beyond the scope of this chapter.
- 14 For details of these developments in the United States, see Forrest and Gross (2004), Numbers (2006), and Sarkar (2007a, 2011b). However, creationism is by no means restricted to that country – see, for example, Coleman and Carlin (2004).
- 15 For a superb historical treatment of the physical examples from this section, see Pais (1986).
- 16 There are additional theological concerns about the nature of a god that gets relegated to an increasingly lesser role as science progressively encompasses more of the world. This issue is beyond the scope of this chapter – for an entry into this discussion, see Sarkar (2007a).
- 17 One should add that there seems to be no tradition, Western or otherwise, in which Plantinga’s science would be viewed as science.

RELIGION AND METAPHYSICAL NATURALISM

Neil A. Manson

How should we explain the account in the Book of Genesis of a worldwide flood (Genesis 6:1–8:22)? One way is to say it actually happened – that God exists and caused a worldwide deluge that lasted forty days and that Noah survived to tell about it. While possible (in a very broad sense), this explanation strikes even most theists as deeply implausible, simply because it does not square with the data we have from numerous scientific fields like geology, paleontology, and biology. Furthermore, while some theists feel committed to a literal interpretation of their sacred texts, most subscribe to a hermeneutic whereby at least some parts of scripture need not be taken literally. So explaining the Flood story by saying God really did it is not only implausible, for most theists it is unnecessary.

Another way to ‘explain’ the Flood story would be to dismiss it as just another strange myth, yet that answer fails to account for the prevalence of similar flood stories throughout the ancient world, including in the Epic of Gilgamesh and in Greek and Roman mythology. Flatly dismissing the Flood story as completely fabricated and factually ungrounded leaves us less than fully satisfied intellectually. But what could the Flood story be if not just pure myth?

A scientific picture is emerging that, though controversial, seems to offer a plausible history of the Flood story as arising from distortion of reports of a real occurrence (Ryan and Pitman 1997). Archaeological and geological evidence indicates that, about 7,500 years ago, what is now the Black Sea was a dry basin inhabited by humans. Due to rising waters brought about by the end of the Ice Age, a natural dam at what is now the Bosphorus Straits was broken, with a vast area being flooded in the course of a few months. The ruins of whole villages have been found beneath the Black Sea. This cataclysm was likely preserved in ancient Near Eastern myth and spread globally. It found its way into many religious texts, including the Book of Genesis.

Supposing this account of the Flood is true, it is a satisfying explanation. It ties together disparate facts the way good scientific explanations are supposed to do. The explanation involves no mysterious forces or supernatural powers. It confines itself to empirically verifiable claims and thus is much easier to accept than the religious explanation that there really was a world-wide flood caused by God. Yet this explanation also shows a measure of respect to the religious traditions of which the Flood story is an element. Although the explanation does not involve God, it also takes the Flood story as something worth investigating scientifically. In seeking an answer to the question of where it came from, those advancing this explanation honor the

Flood story and the religious traditions of which it is a part more than those who simply dismiss it as an ancient fabrication of illiterate shepherds.

Might all of religion likewise be explained in a scientific manner? Such is the hope of many ‘philosophical naturalists’. Roughly, naturalists believe that only natural entities exist – that there are no gods, ghosts, or supernatural entities of any sort – and that the best way to obtain knowledge of the world is through the methods of science. (This short description, though capturing the spirit of self-described naturalists, masks significant complexity and controversy; see Witmer 2012.) By definition, all naturalists are atheists, though not all atheists are naturalists. For example, Theravada Buddhists deny that any gods exist and so are atheists, but they also say the material world is an illusion and so are not naturalists either. Still, most atheists avow naturalism, and even many theists adopt naturalism as their working assumption for scientific purposes. A naturalistic explanation of religion is an explanation of religion that presupposes naturalism.

Many naturalists claim all of the phenomena of religion – the content of religious texts, the character of religious and mystical experiences, the nature of rituals, the structure of religious organizations, the effect of religion in history, politics, and economics, and so on – can be accounted for solely in terms of natural forces. For them, religion is a predictable consequence of known or knowable natural causes. Why people believe in gods, spirits, and souls is no more of a mystery than why children sometimes make imaginary friends, why mobs form, why people believe in good luck and jinxes, and why every culture has burial rituals. These naturalists acknowledge the real occurrence of (most) religious phenomena yet explain those phenomena without any reference whatsoever to supernatural objects or forces. To take Christianity as an example, they think the contents of the Bible, the experiences people have when they claim to feel God’s presence, and the rapid spread of Christianity in the Roman era all can be explained in purely natural terms. There is a long history of naturalistic explanations of religion drawing from the traditional social sciences: anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology. The favored naturalistic explanations of religion nowadays involve parts of these classic approaches, but add a new theoretical element: evolutionary biology.

Collectively, these explanations seem to provide powerful support for naturalism. First, they promise to make naturalism intellectually satisfying by resolving what biologist E.O. Wilson calls ‘the enduring paradox of religion’ (1975: 561) – namely, ‘that so much of its substance is demonstrably false, yet it remains a driving force in all societies’. By the lights of the naturalist, the existence, prevalence, and power of religion is a puzzle demanding a solution. These explanations promise to solve that puzzle. Second, it seems that if naturalists really can explain all the phenomena of religion without needing to posit the actual existence of gods, angels, demons, souls, spirits, reincarnation, karma, or miracles, then they have not only shown naturalism is consistent with all observed facts, they have shown the naturalistic worldview is superior to any religious worldview. That is, in fact, the way many naturalists view their theory of religion – as a weapon to wound an already weakened set of rivals. ‘We’ve got God by the throat and I’m not going to stop until one of us is dead’, psychologist Jesse Bering was quoted as saying (Murray 2009: 169).

Naturalistic theories of religion, then, are not just of scientific interest; their religious and philosophical implications are profound. These theories thus demand close attention. Our examination of them begins by surveying three classic approaches and two evolutionary ones, seeing both how they differ and what they have in common. It ends with an evaluation of the philosophical and religious implications of the naturalistic theories of religion. Note that the division of theories into clear categories is a bit artificial. Few naturalists restrict their explanation of religion to just one approach. But for almost every naturalist approach, one takes precedence

over the others. Space necessitates the survey be wide-ranging and thematic. For a more detailed presentation of classic approaches, readers are advised to consult Thrower (1999); for evolutionary approaches, readers should go to Boyer (2001) and Schloss and Murray (2009).

Three classic approaches to explaining religion naturalistically

Anthropomorphic projection theories

Almost 350 years ago philosophers as diverse as Thomas Hobbes (1651/1996) and Baruch Spinoza (1677/1982) asserted that religion results from failed efforts at explanation. According to this approach, primitive humans mistakenly projected human qualities onto the natural world in the course of trying to explain it. This led to religion. There are four basic elements to this theory: (A) primitive humans were hyperactive explainers; (B) primitive humans were biased towards purposive explanations; (C) primitive humans projected their own psychological states onto the gods they created; (D) through the power of culture, modern humans inherited the religious beliefs of their primitive ancestors.

(A) Hyperactive explaining

‘It is peculiar to the nature of man, to be inquisitive into the causes of the events they see’, said Hobbes (1651/1996: 71). We humans are unique amongst animals in being active (indeed, hyperactive) explainers. We are reluctant to accept that some things happen by chance or without a purpose. Thus phenomena such as a bolt of lightning’s killing a fellow tribe member, a child’s being born the same day an elder dies, or a disease’s ravaging a nearby village were never simply dismissed as chance. Instinct drove our primitive ancestors to seek some explanation or other of such phenomena.

(B) Purposive explanation

Primitive humans, lacking scientific procedures, relied on the form of explanation best suited to their nascent social world: purposive explanation. Purposive explanations (also called ‘intentional’ or ‘personal’ explanations) involve purposes: desire, need, jealousy, anger, and so on. When they saw something they did not understand, our ancestors posited a person to explain it, because that was the only kind of explanation they knew how to give. If it thundered, our cave-dwelling ancestors reasoned, then someone must have wanted it to thunder.

(C) Projection

If a person has the power to cause lightning to strike, then care must be taken not to become the target of that person. In order to avoid things like lightning strikes, our ancestors needed to figure out the purposes of these mysterious, powerful beings. Since they could not communicate with these non-existent beings, humans projected their purposes onto the gods. (Projection is the psychological phenomenon of attributing to someone else one’s own thoughts and feelings.) Primitive humans made the supernatural beings out to be just like the natural beings with which they were most familiar: themselves. This led to a curiosity. ‘Among so many of Nature’s blessings they were bound to discover quite a number of disasters, such as storms, earthquakes, diseases and so forth, and they maintained that these occurred because the gods were angry at the wrongs done to them by men, or the faults committed in the course of their worship’, said

Spinoza (1677/1982: 58). To placate the gods, the gods had to be provided with food or with gestures of submission, just as one would feed a guest or bow to a king to keep the king happy. This fear of the gods and desire to please them explains religious rituals, practices of abasement and worship, sacrificial offerings, and so on.

(D) Cultural transmission

The belief in gods persists because religion is culturally transmitted; once religious belief entered the human mind, it got passed down from generation to generation. Even 'advanced' religions such as Christianity can be explained in terms of the same fundamental patterns displayed in 'primitive' religions, with the difference between 'primitive' and 'advanced' being that the latter have had more time, resources, and need to tidy up their stories than the former.

Sociological theories

Over 150 years ago, philosopher and economist Karl Marx advanced a theory of religion within his larger theory of politics, economics, and society. For Marx, religion emerges from powerful societal forces. It is primarily a group phenomenon, not an individual one. There are four basic elements to this theory: (E) the religion of a society is a product of its social, political, and economic structures; (F) the religious beliefs and practices of individuals in a society reflect the social, political, and economic dynamics of that society; (G) religion serves a dual function with respect to social control: the powerful use it to oppress, and the oppressed comfort themselves with it rather than revolt against their oppressors; (H) as a society moves toward justice and equality, religion becomes increasingly unnecessary; as we approach social perfection, religion will wither away.

(E) The sociological thesis

Sociology is the study of societies and social structures as natural objects amenable to scientific investigation. Sociologists study human societies with the same mindset that primatologists study bands of gorillas. From this perspective, religious beliefs and practices are just further aspects of human societies – strange in many ways, to be sure, but still explicable in terms of the functions they fulfill in the complex machinery of social life. For example, in *The Rise of Christianity*, sociologist Rodney Stark (1996) explains the flourishing of Christianity in the late Roman Empire in terms of the advantageous structures it created. 'Central doctrines of Christianity prompted and sustained attractive, liberating, and effective social relations and organizations', he writes (1996: 211). He says its emphasis on community and caring allowed Christian communities to withstand epidemic diseases much better than non-Christian ones (1996: Chapter 4). Stark thinks Christianity's rise can be explained in terms of the social functions it performed – promoting literacy, strengthening family bonds, surviving disasters, and so on. More generally, sociologists of religion seek to explain all major facets of religion in terms of religion's effect on society.

(F) The reflection thesis

For proponents of the sociological approach, religion is a primitive form of psychological and sociological speculation. Figuring out other people is terribly difficult. Understanding society is even harder. Lacking the tools of science, primitive humans tried to understand themselves and their societies as best they could – through myth and through reflection on their gods. Consequently,

if you want to understand how the people of a society think of themselves – if you want to understand their pre-philosophical, pre-scientific conception of what it is to be human and of what society is – then study their religion. This was the view of Ludwig Feuerbach, an early nineteenth-century philosopher and anthropologist whose writings influenced Marx profoundly. ‘Religion is man’s earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge’, said Feuerbach (1841/1957: 13–14). ‘His own nature is in the first instance contemplated by him as that of another being. ... The divine being is nothing else than the human being, or, rather, the human nature purified.’ Marx likewise claimed religion holds up a cracked mirror to society. ‘The religious world is but the reflex of the real world’, said Marx (1867). ‘Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has already lost himself again’; it is ‘an inverted world-consciousness’, he said (1844). Like Feuerbach and Marx before them, advocates of the sociological approach today see religion as reflecting society and the close study of religion as revealing hidden social structures and dynamics.

(G) The oppression thesis

Religion arises, Marx claimed, because society is divided into classes: patricians and plebeians, lords and serfs, or – in capitalism – the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In each case we can identify one class as the oppressors and another as the oppressed. The poor, weak oppressed need relief from their suffering, so they create a fantasy world beyond this one where their pain is soothed. ‘Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people’, wrote Marx (1844). The rich, powerful oppressors, meanwhile, use religion to justify their oppression and to keep themselves in power. They create ‘ideologies’ – sets of ideas that impose social control. Examples include the caste system in India and the doctrine that kings rule by divine right. These ideologies perpetuate oppression by convincing the oppressed that divine powers validate the oppressive social structures. Even seemingly benign elements of religious ethics can play a role in the system of oppression. For example, Marx alleges the common religious demand to engage in charity privileges the ruling classes, since they are the ones best able to display this virtue. The injunction to give to the poor thus elevates the wealthy and keeps the poor down. The emphasis on charity also provides an inbuilt justification for never addressing the root causes of poverty that make charity necessary – namely, unjust social structures.

(H) The secularization thesis

The oppression thesis suggests a corollary – that if oppressive social structures are eliminated, there will be no need for religion. As social structures become less oppressive – as the relationships between humans become ever more just and equitable – religious belief will become less common. So social progress leads to secularization. The eventual result will be a world without religion. ‘The religious reflex of the real world can, in any case, only then finally vanish, when the practical relations of everyday life offer to man none but perfectly intelligible and reasonable relations with regard to his fellowmen and to Nature’, said Marx (1867). That is, once society is re-shaped on a fair and equitable basis, religion will go away. Call this belief ‘the secularization thesis’. The belief is widespread. ‘For nearly three centuries, social scientists and assorted Western intellectuals have been promising the end of religion’, write Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (2000: 57). ‘Each generation has been confident that within another few decades, or possibly a bit longer, humans will “outgrow” belief in the supernatural.’

Freudian psychological theories

Almost 100 years ago, pioneering psychologist Sigmund Freud laid out a theory of religion in popular books such as *The Future of an Illusion* (1927/1989) and *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930/1989). His theory incorporated elements of both the anthropomorphic projection and sociological approaches, but Freud added a quite new ingredient to the naturalistic broth: the idea that religion results from unconscious mental processes common to all humans. Deep-seated psychological forces – forces that shape our minds from birth – push us to believe in God or in gods. There are four basic elements to this theory: (I) subconscious mental mechanisms powerfully affect our beliefs and our actions; (J) some of these subconscious mental mechanisms are not aimed at producing true beliefs; (K) the psychological development of a person from infant to adult progresses through age-appropriate stages, yet humans tend to go back to some age-inappropriate stage in the face of frustration of their desires; (L) religion results from the unconscious mental process of wish-fulfillment, a process aimed at anxiety-reduction rather than truth; it involves regression to an infantile psychic state, wherein one receives total love and protection from one's parents.

(I) Subconscious mental processes

Freud's signal contribution to psychology was his identification of universal, innate, subconscious mental mechanisms – mental processes that have an enormous effect on what we believe and on how we act, and yet never make themselves known to us (unless we undergo special procedures such as psychoanalysis). Nowadays belief in unconscious mental processes is so widespread that their existence is taken for granted. Indeed, most of us have explained someone else's behavior in terms of processes such as projection and repression. Yet the idea of subconscious mental processes the nature of which can be revealed by careful investigation blossomed with Freud.

(J) Mental processes not aimed at the truth

Some mental processes typically aim to produce true beliefs. Take memory as an example. When you try to remember something – say, where your keys are – the goal is to retrieve the truth. Freud claimed that a crucial feature of many subconscious mental processes is that they aim to produce something other than true belief. For example, extremely painful experiences such as combat stress are blocked out of conscious thought, resulting in 'repressed' memories that can only be unlocked by psychotherapy. In cases like these, the goal of the subconscious mental process is to avoid the truth, not retrieve it.

(K) Psychological development

Newborns lack the full array of mental tools had by adult humans. Freud thought the passage from infant to adult proceeds jaggedly and through stages (oral, anal, and genital for children), just as our bodily development occurs in distinct stages (infancy, adolescence, maturity, senescence). Importantly for Freud, psychological progression never completely erases earlier stages, so that 'regression' (going back) to an earlier, age-inappropriate stage remains possible. Frustration of one's basic desires – for love, sex, status, or revenge – can cause so much psychic strain that one copes by regressing. For example, the stockbroker caught cheating at business and surrounded by officials ready to make an arrest might collapse to the floor and mutter 'I want my mommy.'

(L) Religion as wish-fulfillment

Freud identified wish-fulfillment as one of many mental processes not aimed at the truth. Wish-fulfillment aims to reduce anxiety by presenting as probable or actual states of affairs that in reality are very unlikely, if not impossible. For example, buyers of lottery tickets get relief from the tedium of their impoverished lives by thinking ahead to the goods they will buy when they win the lottery. The intensity of their belief is out of all proportion to the probability that it is true. Belief in God, said Freud, arises from a combination of wish-fulfillment and regression to an age-inappropriate psychological stage. Faced with the harsh realities of life, humans seek a ‘father figure’ – a being possessing precisely the features of a small child’s idealized picture of a parent. To the helpless infant, parents are all-powerful, all-knowing, loving, just, and mysterious. The sense of security an infant feels when doted on by a parent is overwhelmingly good. The loss of that sense is painful. In the face of anxiety, adults unconsciously seek to regain that feeling they had as children. They thus create objects to fill the role that their demystified parents no longer play. Gods result.

Two evolutionary approaches to explaining religion

As with the classic approaches, evolutionary approaches find the source of religion in the human realm – in our minds and our societies. Much more so than the classic approaches from the social sciences, however, the view of the mind and of society underlying the evolutionary approaches derives from a scientifically rich and well-supported biological theory: Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection. From its beginnings 150 years ago, evolutionary theory has been used to answer basic questions like where humans came from, why they walk on two feet and have opposable thumbs, and how they are related to other animals. In the last half-century, however, evolutionary theory has increasingly been applied to human mental and social structures themselves.

Explaining religion through evolutionary psychology

According to proponents of ‘evolutionary psychology’, human thought – both conscious and unconscious – arose in a certain sort of environment. It has quirks and oddities that are best explained in terms of their usefulness to our ancestors. Nowadays, craving sweets leads to obesity, but in the low-calorie environment of the paleolithic era, that urge for high-calorie food helped keep our ancestors alive. Likewise, though now we call them fallacious, belief-forming processes like hasty generalization and stereotyping were ‘adaptive’ for our primitive ancestors. That is, those processes contributed to the survival and reproduction of their bearers. Nowadays, when one person dies after eating a mushroom, we can employ an array of scientific tests to determine what, exactly, in the mushroom caused the death. Back then, however, believing all mushrooms are poisonous was close to the optimal strategy, even if the belief was false. Those who believed all mushrooms are poisonous were more likely to survive and reproduce than the riskier sorts of eaters. According to proponents of evolutionary psychology, the tendency to form useful-but-mistaken beliefs was a heritable trait that became ‘hard-wired’ into us. These error-prone belief-forming processes create religion.

The evolutionary psychology approach to religion comprises four basic elements: (M) the human mind is best viewed, not as a unified whole, but as a collection of modules that evolved to perform specific tasks. These modules can be adaptive without producing true beliefs; (N) several of our mental modules are devoted to detecting and responding to other agents, so our minds are predisposed to see agency, intention, and purpose everywhere; (O) mental modules

equip all humans with templates for belief, including beliefs about the agents we detect. These templates strongly constrain possible religious beliefs. Despite the seeming diversity of religions, all religions share underlying similarities due to the constraints imposed by the templates these modules provide; (P) religion is a byproduct of a mental architecture that evolved to navigate the natural and social worlds inhabited by our primitive ancestors. Although the specific mental processes that give rise to religion are all adaptive in the right environment, they can and often do lead to false beliefs, including religious ones.

(M) Mental modules: adaptive, not truth-seeking

Just as the software package of a computer contains a host of subprograms and applications, say cognitive psychologists, the human mind is composed of a patchwork of mental modules. These modules are brain subsystems devoted to specific tasks like classifying objects as people, animals, plants, or tools, remembering faces, and assessing risk. Cognitive psychology is the study of these mental modules. They can be advantageous to their bearers even if they predictably fail in certain situations. Psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky famously called the rules underlying these modules ‘heuristics’ – decision-making shortcuts that work most of the time but fail in specific, identifiable circumstances (Kahneman 2012). Their key insight was that decision-making in the real world takes place in a demanding environment. Factors such as ease, speed, and the necessity of avoiding calamities often work against the rational ideal of generating all and only true beliefs. Take hasty generalization as an example. While ideally it should be avoided, out in the real world making snap judgments might be the optimal strategy. Rather than spend time and risk death by testing out an array of mushrooms, a person might conclude that all mushrooms are poisonous after just one or two bad experiences with them.

(N) Theory of mind

In cognitive psychology, an ‘agent’ is any being that seems to move of its own volition and for its own purposes. Agents include animals as well as humans. Since agents were amongst both the most threatening and most desirable objects in the environment of our primitive ancestors, evolution produced sophisticated methods for detecting agents. For example, our ancestors bequeathed us various mechanisms for discerning whether the noise intruding on our night-time campfire is a person, a predatory animal, or just the wind. These mechanisms produce a high percentage of false positives (mistakenly thinking there is an agent around when in fact there is not) in order to avoid false negatives (mistakenly thinking there is not an agent around when there is). This makes sense from an evolutionary perspective since the cost of a false negative is so high; if you fail to detect just one prowling tiger, you die. But this tendency results in humans routinely attributing agency when it just is not there. Thus belief in gods and spirits can be explained in part as arising from a ‘hyperactive agency detection device’ – a mental module geared toward attributing agency at the drop of a pin.

(O) Universal templates for religious belief

Possession of the mental modules studied by cognitive psychologists, including the ones devoted to agency detection, is not limited to particular humans at particular times. It is universal. If religion is produced by these universal mental modules, we should expect all religions to show signs of coming from the same recipe. Proponents of the evolutionary psychology approach point to a host of universal features of religious belief, correlating each feature with an appropriate

mental module. For example, in almost all religions, the supernatural beings worshipped are not abstract entities like The Force from *Star Wars*. They are agents – God, Shiva, Zeus. This is no accident. Because of hyperactive agency detection, ‘agent-like concepts of gods and spirits are *natural*’, says anthropologist Pascal Boyer (2001: 245). Likewise, it is a universal feature of religion that the gods and spirits worshipped are social beings who are motivated to interact with us and who possess ‘strategic information’ (Boyer 2001: 150–63) such as what our enemies plan to do or whether a drought will end soon. This feature of religion comes from the array of social-interaction modules with which all normal humans are equipped.

(P) Religion as a byproduct of our underlying evolved psychology

Putting these three strands together, proponents of the evolutionary psychology approach say they can explain religion as a product of our own minds – minds that evolved to help all humans survive a world in which other agents were a central concern. Religion is universal because the basic structure of the human mind is universal. ‘The explanation for religious beliefs and behaviors is to be found in the way all human minds work’, says Boyer (2001: 2). Our in-built mental modules, evolved to make inferences about agents, actually create the gods and spirits religious people worship, entreat, and contemplate. Knowing how our minds work, then, it is no surprise religion arose amongst us. But that is no reason to think religious beliefs are true, any more than the ‘naturalness’ of fallacious belief-forming processes like hasty generalization makes the beliefs produced by those mechanisms true.

Sociobiological explanations of religion

A quite different strand of explanation, yet one still under the evolutionary umbrella, was first articulated by evolutionary biologist E.O. Wilson, author of the controversial classic *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975). Sociobiology, says Wilson, rests on viewing social behaviors – from the activities of a bee hive or an ant mound to the organization of human society – as resulting from evolution by natural selection. The right sorts of social behaviors (e.g., bees swarming when the hive is disturbed) confer advantages on the groups that practice them – advantages that can be selected for by nature. Towards the end of his book, Wilson speculates that the rise and spread of various religious and ethical systems can be explained in these terms. ‘A form of group selection operates in the competition between sects’, says Wilson (1975: 561). ‘Those that gain adherents survive; those that cannot, fail. Consequently, religions, like other human institutions, evolve so as to further the welfare of their practitioners.’ In what ways does religion promote group survival? Religions the doctrines of which encourage group defense or high rates of reproduction, Wilson thinks, survive better and come to have more adherents. The explanation for the belief that martyrs go directly to Heaven is that those with the belief are more willing to fight and die for their social group than those without it. Thus societies that transmit the belief that martyrs go directly to Heaven have an advantage in combat. ‘God wills it’, says Wilson (1975: 561), ‘but the summed Darwinian fitness of the tribe was the ultimate if unrecognized beneficiary.’ Likewise, he thinks, successful religions teach procreation is a religious duty. ‘Be fruitful and multiply’ (Genesis 9:7) is the sort of belief sociobiology predicts successful religions will have; without such beliefs, a religion will wither from lack of new members.

Sociobiological explanations involve two ideas that are controversial amongst Darwinians. Together they lead to a third idea which is the core of the sociobiological approach to religion. (Q) Traits that are not adaptive for an individual organism might nonetheless bring an advantage to the group of which the individual is a member, so it makes sense to talk about natural

selection at the level of the social group. (R) Evolutionary explanations can invoke a unit of selection other than the gene: the ‘meme’. Memes are ideas and cultural practices that can be treated as heritable traits, passed on from one generation to the next and spreading from one culture to another by imitation. (S) The origin, spread, and current distribution of religious beliefs and practices can be explained in terms of the contribution religious memes make to the survival and reproduction of the human social groups that hold them.

(Q) Group selection

Most people conceive of natural selection – ‘survival of the fittest’ – as operating on individual organisms. But in principle natural selection can operate at other levels of organization, so long as an appropriate unit of selection is identified. Consider ‘kin selection’, which operates at the level of the gene. A behavior that decreases the chances of an individual spreading all of its own genes can nonetheless be selected for if it increases the chances that the genes of its kin are spread, since kin share many genes. This explains why worker bees sacrifice their lives for the sake of the hive; the worker bees are the queen’s offspring, so they all share genes. By defending the hive, the ‘self-sacrificing’ bees are actually helping spread some of their own genes. This example suggests that some ‘unselfish’ behaviors like dying on behalf of others – behaviors that, intuitively, seem inexplicable in Darwinian terms – might actually be explicable in terms of benefit at a non-individual level. Sociobiological explanations operate at the level of the group; they involve what is called ‘group selection’. Although largely rejected in the middle of the twentieth century, group selectionist explanations are more common in evolutionary biology nowadays. Sociobiologists think moral behaviors such as altruism can be explained, in part, in terms of group selection.

(R) Memes

Not only are evolutionary explanations not confined to individual organisms, they are not restricted to tangible, physical items. While the most common unit of selection in evolutionary biology, the gene, clearly has a physical bearer (DNA), we can treat more abstract items as fundamental units of selection. Philosopher of biology Peter Godfrey-Smith coined the term ‘Darwinian population’ to mean ‘a population – a collection of particular things – that has the capacity to undergo evolution’, with the members of the population featuring ‘variation in individual character, which affects reproductive output, and which is heritable’ (Godfrey-Smith 2009: 6). On that broad definition, we can talk of the evolution of things like languages, even though languages consist of non-physical, abstract items like words. Some evolutionary explanations of religion work with this broad conception of natural selection, with the units of selection being religious ‘memes’. ‘Memes are units of culture: notions, values, stories, etc. that get people to speak or act in certain ways that make other people store a replicated version of these mental units’, says Boyer (2001: 35). Marriage rites, ethical maxims, theological claims about the nature of God – all are memes and so all can, potentially, be explained in terms of evolution by natural selection.

(S) Advantages to the group of religious memes

Combining group selection with memetics suggests exploring what the benefit is to the group of the religious meme. Wilson thinks he can explain a lot about religion this way. ‘It is useful to hypothesize that cultural details are for the most part adaptive in a Darwinian sense, even though

some may operate indirectly through enhanced group survival' he says (1975: 560). This leads him to suggest a host of connections between religious memes and societal benefits: 'human rituals. ... not only label but reaffirm and rejuvenate the moral values of the community' (1975: 560); '[religious] ceremonies can offer information on the strength and wealth of tribes and families' (1975: 561); and 'shibboleths, special costumes, and sacred dancing and music' bring about 'religious experience', making the individual 'ready to reassert allegiance to his tribe and family, perform charities, consecrate his life, leave for the hunt, join the battle, die for God and country' (1975: 561). Once we ascend to the level of the group, say sociobiologists, many otherwise puzzling features of religion are readily explained.

How the evolutionary theories draw from the classic theories

Many proponents of evolutionary theories of religion say those theories mark a clean break from the classic theories. They see in their favored approach the potential for breakthroughs unachievable by the older approaches. 'With the new millennium a new scientific study of religion has emerged', says psychologist Justin Barrett (2009: 76). In this volume, religion scholar Todd Tremlin calls it 'the cognitive science of religion' and says it 'represents a synthesis of state-of-the-art cognitive science and traditional religion studies' (Tremlin, this volume: 390). And in *Religion Explained*, Boyer spends the bulk of the first chapter (2001: 4–31) identifying the problems with the classic approaches to clear the way for his own evolutionary approach. However, our survey of the evolutionary approaches shows that, thematically at least, they bear a strong resemblance to the classic ones. Were Hobbes, Spinoza, Marx, and Freud alive today, they would see many of their ideas about religion reflected in the new evolutionary theories.

As an example, let us look at a particular feature of theistic religions to compare the evolutionary explanation of it with the classic explanation. All believers in God are supposed to think God is all-knowing (omniscient) and all-powerful (omnipotent). Why is this so? Why is God not thought to be limited in power or knowledge? Barrett (2009: 89–93) invokes research findings from childhood psychology. He says 'belief in the divine attributes of a supergod such as those in Abrahamic traditions receives special support from cognitive structures. Specifically, super-knowledge, super-perception, super-power (especially to create natural things), and immortality all benefit from the operation of mental tools in childhood development' (2009: 90). Regarding omniscience, he says 'In the enormous area of research concerning children's developing Theory of Mind, data strongly support the position that before around five years of age (and sometimes later) children assume that everyone's beliefs about the world are infallible. That is, if a three-year-old child knows that he has a coin in his pocket, he assumes that his mother, too, will know that he has a coin in his pocket' (2009: 90). As with omniscience, Barrett explains the attribution to God of omnipotence as arising from 'children's tendency to treat adults as god-like by overestimating their strength and power' (2009: 92).

Compare Barrett's theory to Freud's. For Freud, God is the believer's substitute for the god-like parents lost to maturation as the nascent theist moves from infancy into childhood, then adolescence, and then finally adulthood. Incomprehensible and too harsh for us, the adult world leads some of us to regress to a childish stage. 'The origin of the religious attitude can be traced back in clear outlines as far as the feeling of infantile helplessness', Freud wrote (1930/1989: 20–21). For Freud, religion is 'the system of doctrines and promises which. ... assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and compensate him in a future existence for any frustrations he suffers here. The common man cannot imagine this Providence otherwise than in the figure of an enormously exalted father' (1930/1989: 22). For Freud, belief in God (I) arises from subconscious mental processes (K) present in our earliest stages of psychological development

that (J) do not lead to the truth and (L) replicate the child's idealized conception of the parent. All four elements – (I), (J), (K), and (L) – are present in Barrett's theory. The basic move is the same for both theorists. The central difference is that Barrett has the benefit of much better (more voluminous, more recent, and more rigorously acquired) scientific evidence for his claims than Freud had.

Other parallels are easy to find. The idea that (M) the mind comprises mental modules that are adaptive, not truth-seeking matches Freud's idea that (I) there are subconscious mental processes that (J) are not aimed at the truth. The idea that (N) we are hard-wired to over-detect agency as part of our overall Theory of Mind matches the idea of Hobbes and Spinoza that humans are (A) hyperactive explainers who (B) are disposed toward purposive explanations. The idea that (R) religious memes spread across populations and through time and (S) can bring advantages to the societies possessing them matches the ideas that (D) religion is culturally transmitted and (E) can be explained in terms of the social functions it fulfills.

More generally, evolutionary theories of religion that focus on individual psychology fuse themes from the anthropomorphic projection theory of Hobbes and Spinoza with themes from the psychological theory of Freud, while sociobiological theories of religion parallel thematically the sociological theory of Marx. These connections suggest we take with a grain of salt any claim that evolutionary theories of religion represent something totally new. The scientific evidence behind the evolutionary theories is new and powerful, yes, and the newer evolutionary theories refine the classic theories in many important respects, but the basic modes of explanation are quite similar.

Evaluating the naturalistic explanations of religion

Now that we have a grasp of the diverse approaches naturalists take towards explaining religion, we are in a position to evaluate those approaches. In trying to do that, however, we immediately confront a difficulty. Naturalists and the religious are in separate camps. They disagree, not just about the existence of supernatural entities, but about a whole host of philosophical matters: what the proper standards are for rational belief, what the foundations are of morality, even how to define what 'natural' is. The divisions are so great that there may be few shared criteria for evaluating the naturalistic explanations of religion. Rather than spend time trying to find enough common ground to give a neutral assessment, let us break the task in two. First we will evaluate the naturalistic explanations of religion from a naturalist perspective, then we will evaluate them from a religious perspective. Readers can decide for themselves how to balance those evaluations.

Naturalistic explanations of religion from a naturalist perspective

Naturalists have a rich and scientifically well-informed array of options for understanding what they encounter in religion. For them, the prospects for explaining religion fully look good. Certainly there are important issues to be settled. For example, there is much debate amongst evolutionary theorists of religion about whether religion is adaptive (Schloss 2009: 14–17; Richerson and Newson 2009; Bloom 2009). Furthermore, evolutionary theorists have yet to say much about atheistic religions (religions in which no gods are worshipped). Atheistic religions form a large category, one that includes Buddhism, Confucianism, Daoism, Jainism, and some forms of Hinduism. Despite the work that still needs to be done in important areas like these, however, it appears that naturalists have developed a solid approach to explaining religion, and all that remains is to extend that approach by doing more and better science. Digging deeper, however, we see considerable infighting amongst the naturalists. These divisions suggest the

various approaches to explaining religion naturalistically are incompatible as they stand now and cannot be merged into a unified scientific theory of religion. That, in turn, means naturalists have much work to do developing the theoretical tools to explain religion in a consistent, coherent way.

First division: naturalists who are opposed to evolutionary explanations of religion

The most fundamental split is between those who embrace the use of evolutionary biology and psychology and those who eschew it. In the traditional social sciences – the academic fields of anthropology, sociology, economics, and psychology, as well as intersecting fields like religious studies, ethnic studies, and gender/sexuality studies – there is great resistance to understanding human phenomena through the lens of evolutionary biology. In these fields there is a strong tilt toward ‘social constructionism’ and away from ‘essentialism’. Evolutionary theories of cultural phenomena like religion are seen as threatening to re-introduce a dangerous and discredited idea: ‘human nature’. Some evolutionary theorists – most famously cognitive scientist Steven Pinker (2002) – proudly endorse the idea of human nature, so long as that idea is purged of its religious elements and grounded in modern evolutionary biology. But, as Pinker himself documents, many social scientists do not like his sort of position.

Some advocates of evolutionary approaches to religion are sensitive to the problem. Biologist David Sloan Wilson (no relation to E.O. Wilson) acknowledges, ‘the scientific study of religion has traditionally been the province of anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists’ (2002: 47), and those approaches are still going strong. Furthermore, within those approaches, the trend has been away from, rather than toward, incorporation of evolutionary theory (Richerson and Newson 2009: 101–2). ‘As a newcomer, any modern evolutionary approach to religion must prove itself against these older traditions’, says Wilson (2002: 47). He spends Chapter 2 of *Darwin’s Cathedral* trying to reconcile his new approach with the older ones, in particular his approach with Stark’s sociological approach. But Stark is not in a mood for peace. ‘This entire body of recent work [on the origins of religion from biologists and evolutionary psychologists] is remarkably inferior because so few authors could restrain their militant atheism. Contempt is not a scholarly virtue’, says Stark (2007: 1). Overall, it seems that, for there to be a single, unified, best naturalist theory of religion, those naturalists opposed to taking an evolutionary approach to religion must reconcile themselves with (or surrender themselves to) those in favor of it.

Second division: evolutionary psychologists who are opposed to sociobiology

Another division lies within evolutionary approaches, between evolutionary psychology and sociobiology. As noted earlier, the sociobiological approach rests on two controversial notions: group selection and memes. As we saw in section (R) on memes, we can talk about the evolution of the elements within a Darwinian population if that population has members featuring ‘variation in individual character, which affects reproductive output, and which is heritable’ (Godfrey-Smith 2009: 6). But just because the language of evolution fits a population does not mean the elements of the population are natural items or even really exist (Godfrey-Smith 2009: Chapter 2). For example, ghost stories vary in their individual character. Those variations affect how many times a particular ghost story is told, and each retelling of that ghost story inherits important features of the original. We find it tempting in cases like this to talk about the evolution of ghost stories. But just because we talk that way does not mean we really think ghost stories are natural, physical things, or that ghosts are real. For an evolutionary explanation to be naturalistic, it is not enough that it be evolutionary. The units of selection must be natural entities or be realized by natural entities, in the way that genes are coded in DNA, which is just a

chemical. The process by which they are selected must also be natural – neither gods nor humans can steer things. All of this is just to say that it is crucial to add the modifier ‘by natural selection’ to ‘Darwin’s theory of evolution’. Without it, we lose what makes Darwin’s theory special.

Some evolutionary theorists are sticklers on this point. ‘No one “owns” the concept of natural selection, nor can anyone police the use of the term. But its explanatory power, it seems to me, is so distinctive and important that it should not be diluted by metaphorical, poetic, fuzzy, or allusive extensions that only serve to obscure how profound the genuine version of the mechanism really is’, says Pinker (2012). He goes on to argue at length that the idea of ‘group selection’ is one of those illegitimate extensions of natural selection. Memes, too, have come under attack. In his final analysis of them, Godfrey-Smith says memes (what he sometimes calls ‘cultural variants’ and what Boyer calls ‘units of culture’) constitute a very marginal Darwinian population. ‘The world is full of phenomena that look Darwinian but will not fit this narrow set of requirements [for being a Darwinian population]’, he says (2009: 162); ‘surely the way the world fills up with laptops looks very much like the way it fills up with rabbits.’ Just because we can label ideas, learned behaviors, and even artifacts ‘memes’ does not mean they really are subject to natural selection.

Settling this point is crucial for naturalistic explainers of religion. Without group selection and without memes, the sociobiological theory of religion cannot get off the ground, leaving the evolutionary psychology theory of religion as the lone evolutionary approach. That approach is well-suited to explaining ‘individualist’ aspects of religion (conceptions of God, religious experience, etc.) but is poorly suited to explaining ‘groupish’ aspects of religion (the structure of religious organizations, the growth and spread of particular religions, etc.). It is the groupish aspects that sociological theories try to explain. Yet the methodology and theoretical commitments of the traditional social sciences are so frequently at odds with those of the evolutionary psychologists (again, see Pinker 2002) that neutral observers would rightly wonder how the two approaches to explaining religion could both be right.

Naturalistic explanations of religion from a religious perspective

While naturalists will see the naturalistic theories of religion as promising, religious believers will likely see them as threatening. But should they? To see whether they should, let us consider an analogy. Suppose Alexis and Belinda are good friends who talk about politics often. Alexis is a political conservative and Belinda is a political liberal. The two have an acrimonious debate about social policy. It ends without either one having changed her mind. Coincidentally, the next day Belinda reads Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America* (2004), touted as ‘unraveling the great political mystery of our day: Why do so many Americans vote against their economic and social interests?’ Inspired, Belinda develops a theory that explains to Belinda’s own satisfaction why Alexis mistakenly endorses political conservatism. According to Belinda, maladaptive memes have been transmitted from conservatives to Alexis – more precisely, Alexis’s brain. (Where else could memes reside?)

Should Alexis be worried? One thing she might worry about is whether Belinda is right. In that case, she could ask Belinda to explain her theory further and to lend her Frank’s book. Suppose Belinda complies. Alexis spends time reading Frank’s book, as well as some material explaining memes. At the end of the exercise, Alexis concludes that Belinda is wrong – that it is just not true that she, Alexis, holds her conservative beliefs irrationally and does so because conservatives have transmitted maladaptive memes to her brain. Are Alexis’s worries over? No. Now she has a new worry. What could prompt Belinda to develop a theory about Alexis? True friends do not need theories of one another; they get along naturally. Alexis begins to worry

that Belinda no longer sees Alexis as worth reasoning with, at least when it comes to politics. The state of dialogue must have gotten really bad from Belinda's perspective for Belinda to develop such a theory about Alexis. What will Belinda do to Alexis next? Shun her? Ostracize her? De-friend her on Facebook? These are real worries for Alexis.

This example suggests two things. First, naturalists explaining religion naturalistically is an instance of a commonplace: believers in a theory extending that theory so it explains why some people stubbornly refuse to believe that theory. Christians have theories about why people are not Christians, Marxists have theories about why people reject Marxism, and so on. Second, the example suggests religious believers should divide the question. First, do the naturalistic theories of religion show the religious believer that her own beliefs are irrational? Second, what do the naturalistic theories of religion signal about the standing of religious believers with naturalists and within the wider society? Are they a sign that bad things are on the way? A few thoughts on the second question will be expressed at the end of this chapter. As for the first question, there are two reasons religious believers can give for thinking the naturalistic explanations of religion do not show their religious beliefs are irrational.

The first reason: the naturalistic explanations misrepresent religion

For any theory of any phenomena to count as a success, it must be true to the facts and sensitive to the complexities of the phenomena explained. Naturalistic theories of religion must explain religion as it really is – not rest on false, distorted, or simplistic claims about religious phenomena. Religious believers can claim – with some justification – that their beliefs and behaviors have been 'explained' only via misrepresentation.

For example, several naturalists offer 'costly signaling' theories of religion (Bulbulia 2009), whereby charitable giving, altruism, and sacrifice signal high reproductive fitness to potential mates. For example, as part of his sociobiological explanation of religion, E.O. Wilson (1975: 561) says 'the famous potlatch ceremonies of the Northwest Coast Indians enable individuals to advertise their wealth by the amount of goods they give away', suggesting a basic explanation for all religiously-demanded charity. Marx had a similar idea. Yet that explanation presupposes charitable giving will be public. Not all religions teach that charitable giving should be public. For example, Christians will respond that making charity public is neither what Jesus taught nor what Christians typically do. 'When you do an act of charity, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing; your good deed must be secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you' (Matthew 6: 3–4). The puzzle for naturalists is to explain why anonymous giving happens at all. It really does happen, even if polling data indicate that only 5% of the time is religious conviction the primary reason anonymous mega-donors give anonymously (Jacobs 2012). Indeed, some Christian churches go out of their way to make giving anonymous. They have dispensed with collection plates, instead using a bucket that parishioners approach individually during communion or setting up a process to donate through electronic debit. Many ministers scrupulously shield themselves from knowledge of who donated how much, making sure all such information is handled separately by their treasurers. In the ideal, anonymous Christian charity signals nothing about the giver, so a 'costly signaling' explanation of the teaching and practice is unavailable. And, given that anonymous charity removes from the giver all the benefits of advertising, Christianity would seem to discourage charitable giving within the Christian community as a whole. That means we should expect less, not more, overall charitable giving in Christian communities on 'costly signaling' theories. But that is the opposite of what we observe (Brooks 2006). Thus 'costly signaling' theories simply do not fit

the Christian practice of anonymous charitable giving. At least, this is something Christians can plausibly claim.

Examples multiply. Of the Golden Rule – ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ (Luke 6:31) – David Sloan Wilson (2002: 96–97) says group selectionists ‘are predicting that a religion instructs believers to behave for the benefit of their group, which is supported by the Ten Commandments and the Golden Rule.’ But does the Golden Rule really mean ‘Do unto others in your group as you would have them do unto you’? Christians can plausibly say it does not. (Notice how naturalists seeking to explain religion inevitably get involved in the dicey game of scriptural interpretation.) Treating Jesus as promoting the in-group version of the Golden Rule is even more implausible given the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10: 25–37). ‘And who is my neighbor?’ asks a lawyer. ‘Not just your fellow Jews’, says Jesus, ‘but everyone – even the despised Samaritans.’ So Christians can claim, plausibly, that the Golden Rule has been explained only by misrepresenting it.

Again, consider Jesus’s teaching that aggrieved parties ought to ‘turn the other cheek’ (Matthew 5: 38–42): ‘Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If a man sues you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well.’ Do Christians really believe that? David Sloan Wilson does not think so. He interprets this passage as regulating in-group conduct only, at least when analyzing the catechism Calvin produced for the Genevans (Wilson 2002: 97–98). But at least some Christians (e.g., monks) can plausibly reply that they really do believe it. They do not just refuse to retaliate when harmed. Sometimes they open themselves up to even more harm, and behave that way towards anyone whatsoever who harms them, not just to Christians who harm them. If some Christians really do behave that way, what possible selectionist explanation could there be for that? ‘None, which is why no one believes and behaves that way’? ‘None, but anyone who behaves that way is crazy’? If those are the answers, Christians can reply – plausibly – that some non-insane Christians have and do believe and behave that way, so that naturalists just have not explained those beliefs and behaviors.

The point is general. Religious believers of all stripes should worry their belief system is rendered irrational by the naturalistic explanations of religion only if those explanations accurately represent their belief system. Religious believers can reply that, by their own lights, this condition has not been met.

The second reason: they presuppose naturalism is true

It is pretty obvious that religious people and naturalists differ mightily on the interpretation of everyday religious phenomena like praying, reading scripture, or putting money in the collection plate. What is the source of this difference? In *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000), philosopher Alvin Plantinga suggests disagreement about naturalism itself explains the difference. He says naturalism is a powerful, comprehensive, totalizing worldview, just as Christianity is. It colors everything the naturalist thinks and sees, just as Christianity colors everything the Christian thinks and sees. But in that case, Plantinga argues, Christians should not be too worried that naturalists can explain naturalistically the beliefs and behaviors of Christians. After all, the naturalists are operating with a worldview that, by the lights of the Christian, is just false. Plantinga’s point can be generalized so that it applies to a wider range of religious believers than just Christians.

The underlying picture of rationality Plantinga works with is of humans equipped with cognitive powers or faculties – faculties like reason, memory, self-awareness, and so on. Beliefs are the outputs of these faculties. To be what Plantinga calls ‘warranted’ (a term which, for the purposes of this chapter, we will treat as synonymous with ‘rationally held’ or just ‘rational’ for

short), a belief must be produced by faculties geared toward the production of true belief and operating in the right sort of environment. To use Plantinga's terminology, the faculties must be 'properly functioning'. Are the faculties that produce Christian belief functioning properly? According to naturalists, No. They say Christian belief, like all religious belief, is produced by faculties that are either operating in the wrong environment (see (G) above) or are not geared toward the production of true beliefs (see (J) and (M) above). Therefore, the beliefs produced by these faculties are irrational, according to naturalists. Plantinga responds that naturalistic theories of religion show Christian belief is irrational only if naturalism is true. But whether naturalism is or is not true is precisely what naturalists and Christians disagree about. So the fact that naturalists can 'explain' Christian belief should not bother Christians unless Christians are given independent reasons to think naturalism is true.

How about the naturalistic explanations of religion themselves? Do they, just by themselves, give Christians reason for thinking naturalism is true? Plantinga addresses an argument from philosopher Philip Quinn that they do (Plantinga 2000: Chapter 11). Quinn said that, since naturalistic theories of religion show that the belief in God would arise in humans even if God does not exist, the hypothesis that God really does exist is 'explanatorily idle'. Plantinga responds that Christian theism is not put forward as a hypothesis that explains why people believe in God, so Quinn is faulting Christians for failing to do something they do not think they have to do.

This is an important point, so let us illustrate it with two examples. The first is drawn from the history of science. Prior to Isaac Newton, the motion of bodies was explained through a theory developed by the ancient philosopher Aristotle. For Aristotle, any moving body – for example, an arrow shot by an archer – moves because a force ('impetus') was imparted to it. As that impetus gets used up, the body slows down and eventually stops. On this view, the natural state for any body is rest, so if a body is not moving, no explanation is needed of why it is not moving. But if a body is moving, then an explanation of its motion is required. Newton showed this was wrong. According to his First Law of Motion, it is uniform ('inertial') motion that is natural. If a body is moving at a certain speed in a certain direction, it is natural that it continues to move at that very same speed in that very same direction. (This is why the space probes Voyager 1 and 2 are still moving beyond the solar system nearly forty years after they were launched, despite not being propelled for decades.) Now suppose Aristotelians argue as follows: 'Our theory is better than Newton's because our theory explains something Newton's theory does not: inertial motion.' This is a bad argument. The reason Newton's theory cannot explain the First Law of Motion is that the First Law of Motion is an axiom of Newton's theory. If we want to judge Newton's theory, we should not ask Newtonians to prove their axioms. We should see how well the total theory helps us explain everything else. On that criterion, Newtonians have great justification for believing the First Law of Motion, since doing so helps them explain all sorts of things the impetus theory cannot – like why Voyager 1 and 2 are still going.

The second example is religious. Many Buddhist monks claim that, when they meditate, they feel one with the universe. Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg has used various imaging technologies to see what is going on in the brains of those monks (www.andrewnewberg.com). He has found that those experiences correlate with decreased activity in the parietal lobe of the brain. Suppose a naturalist tells a Buddhist monk that science explains why meditating Buddhist monks think they are one with the universe, and that this shows Buddhism is irrational. Should the Buddhist monk worry? Well, by the lights of the Buddhist, there is no self that is distinct from the rest of reality. 'No self' is one of the core beliefs of the Buddhist – arguably, it is the First Law of Buddhism. It helps Buddhists explain many other things – for example, suffering. The non-existence of the self and the oneness of everything is a starting point for Buddhism. It

is one of the central insights through which all else is explained, just as the First Law of Motion is axiomatic in Newton's theory. The naturalist is saying naturalism has the advantage over Buddhism because naturalism explains why the Buddhist believes what is, for the Buddhist, a starting point! (Somehow this seems like a very Buddhist insight. When the naturalist says naturalism explains why the Buddhist believes he is one with the universe, the Buddhist should reply that Buddhism explains why the naturalist believes she is separate from the universe.)

These examples indicate that who is winning depends on how we keep score. What appears to naturalists as something demanding an explanation appears to the Christian as not needing any explanation. What is, by the lights of the naturalist, a victory for the naturalist is, by the lights of the Christian, a draw between the naturalist and the Christian. So, by the lights of the Christian, says Plantinga, the naturalist has failed to show Christian belief is irrational. And, as the example of Buddhist meditation indicates, this strategy can be generalized to religions other than Christianity.

The social implications for religious believers of the naturalistic theories

Let us end with some thoughts about the social implications for religious believers of the naturalistic explanations of religion. For many naturalists, there is no longer any point in debating religious believers on their merits. All that remains is to analyze their stubborn resistance (just as Belinda analyzed Alexis's stubborn adherence to conservatism). The naturalistic theories provide a way for naturalists to do that, and there is nothing religious believers can do to stop them. Naturalists are free to flesh out their worldview as they see fit. When diagnosis turns into the attribution of pathology, however, things get worrisome.

An emerging pattern amongst some naturalists is to talk publicly about religion as a meme infecting the minds of the religious. For example, Kathleen Taylor, a neuroscience writer with a background in philosophy and the author of *The Brain Supremacy* (2012), recently suggested that religious fundamentalism may soon be classified as a treatable mental illness. 'Someone who has for example become radicalised to a cult ideology – we might stop seeing that as a personal choice that they have chosen as a result of pure free will and may start treating it as some kind of mental disturbance', she says (Bennett-Smith 2013). 'In many ways it could be a very positive thing because there are no doubt beliefs in our society that do a heck of a lot of damage' – for example, the belief that corporal punishment of children is divinely sanctioned. Notice the meme talk; it is the belief in divinely sanctioned corporal punishment doing the damage, not the people holding the belief.

That belief is one religious meme among many that philosopher Daniel Dennett thinks should be eliminated: '[religious believers] who will not accommodate, who will not temper, who insist on keeping only the purest and wildest strain of their heritage alive, we will be obliged, reluctantly, to cage or disarm, and we will do our best to disable the memes they fight for' (Dennett 1995: 516). The language of memes cleverly detaches the believer from the belief, but unlike real viruses, memes (if they exist at all) do not just float in the air. They reside in human brains and bodies, and there is no way to disable religious memes without, as Dennett admits, caging or disarming religious believers. For religious believers, that is something to worry about.¹

Note

- 1 Thanks to Robert Westmoreland and Lydia McGrew for helpful comments on parts of this chapter, and to Graham Oppy for inviting me to contribute to this volume.

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